

To Hurt the Pain: An Ethical Criticism of Nathanael West

by

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

Nathanael West is typically considered to be a “major minor” American writer of the late modernist period. Best known today for *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West wrote four dark novellas that excoriated mainstream American culture of the 1930s. Earlier critics viewed his writing mainly as an existentialist exploration of universal human suffering; more recently, critics have claimed West as an avant-garde devoted to the criticism of Depression-era capitalism and consumer society. This thesis represents something of a return to the earlier, humanist study of West’s fiction, which he himself regarded primarily as moral satire. What differentiates this project from earlier studies, however, is its style of criticism. Since the 1980s, a new revitalized and reoriented ethical criticism has emerged, as evidenced by the proliferation of scholarly works and journal special issues on the topic of literature and ethics, the growing number of readers like Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack’s *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (2001), and the general trend toward linking moral philosophy and literary criticism, as carried out by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, among others. The new ethical criticism tends to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive. Using approaches inspired by the scholarship of this late-twentieth century wave of ethical critics, including Wayne Booth and Daniel Schwarz, this dissertation provides a new critical illumination of West the implied author’s unique system of ethics, as dramatized through his narrative explorations of particular lives. It attempts to answer the question that has puzzled Americanist scholars contemplating his works since their initial publication: how can a fictional world so sordid and savage still evoke feelings of compassion and humanity in so many readers? The answer, I will argue, lies in the very ferocity of the author’s depictions of universal human suffering, which ultimately inspire empathy and solidarity despite West’s very real misanthropy.

## Acknowledgements

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“Turning back to his desk, he picked up a bulky letter in a dirty envelope. He read it for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain.”

—Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*

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## Introduction

### Nathanael West, the Misanthropic Ethicist

“I was serious therefore I could not be obscene.  
I was honest therefore I could not be sordid.  
A novelist can afford to be everything but dull.”

—Nathanael West, “Some Notes on Miss L.”

“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”

—T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

I first read Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* in early 2007, in greyest Brussels, in winter. The bleak atmosphere of the novel (“...the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser” [(1933) 2009: 5]) was in perfect harmony with my neighbourhood; in my mind, to this day, the dingy stone angels of Place des Martyrs, and the lines of West’s misanthropic novel are inextricably linked. It was a magnificent gloom. The slight novella, barely 60 pages long in any of its publishers’ iterations, had a visceral impact on me. Every critic and layperson acknowledges *Miss Lonelyhearts* as pessimistic in the extreme, and it was at that, but I felt something more, something that penetrated my moral imagination in a way few books ever had. In West’s curious half-world of cripples, rapists, abused wives, sacrificial lambs, and murderers, something else also abided in the darkness. I would not quite call it a *redemptive* something—West was no Steinbeck. His squalid poor never gave great humanist, universalist speeches. Nor was it simply an accusatory<sup>i</sup> something, like the novels of his proletarian peers, Edward Dahlberg, Nelson Algren and the like, who saw the world in class terms, whose (anti-)heroes were vile and embittered men who had every reason to be vile and embittered. West’s



protagonists were middle class, like himself, or respectably poor at worst, and were typically passive observers in a world of unrelenting, arbitrary violence (with the exception of Lemuel Pitkin, the perpetual victim, not observer, in *A Cool Million*). The bit characters whose tortures they observed (again, excluding Lemuel), did not “rise above” their suffering. They were not brave or admirable. And yet, despite his rampant misanthropy, the experience of reading West was an elevating one. This perplexed me at the time. How could something so sordid fill the heart up with this queer, choking sensation, a painful compassion not too far removed from joy?

Consider this excerpt from *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a letter from a disabled gas meter-man, one of the titular columnist’s correspondents:

...I am a cripple 41 yrs of age which I have been all my life and I have never let myself get blue until lately when I have been feeling lousy all the time on account of not getting anywhere and asking myself what is it all for. You have a education so I figured may be you no. What I want to no is why I go around pulling my leg up and down stairs reading meters for the gas company for a stinking \$22.50 per while the bosses ride around in swell cars living off the fat of the land. Don’t think I am a greasy red. I read where they shoot cripples in Russia because they cant work but I can work better than any park bum and support a wife and child to. But thats not what I am writing you about...It aint the job that I am complaining about but what I want to no is what is the whole stinking business for. (West [1933] 2009: 46-47)

The entire ethos of West is distilled in this one passage. Here he presents the uncouth Peter Doyle, with all his flaws clearly visible—he begins the letter by explaining that he only decided to write upon learning that “Miss Lonelyhearts” was actually a man, and not “some dopey woman” (West [1933] 2009: 46). And yet, Doyle’s obvious misery still generates pathos.

Granted, it is a particularly Westian pathos, rigidly controlled and never allowed to develop into the saccharine. As the narrative unfolds, in a scene that can only be described as squalid, Miss Lonelyhearts sleeps with Doyle's wife. Later, the same coarse Fay Doyle gleefully misinterprets Miss Lonelyhearts' compassion for her husband as sexual interest: "'What a sweet pair of fairies, you guys are,' she said" (49). Eventually, Doyle has his revenge on Miss Lonelyhearts, shooting him in a stairwell.

The fusion of sympathy and antipathy in all of these scenes is characteristically Westian: his works always exhibit the struggle that was playing out within his own psyche between the idealistic and politically progressive West, and the cynical joker West. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley he explains these conflicting impulses: "...write out of hope and for a new and better world—But I'm a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the 'big things' without seeming to laugh or at least smile" (quoted in West 1997: 794). He goes on to express frustration that despite the fact that he personally believes strongly in the aims of the Anti-Nazi League of which he was a part, he could not translate them to fiction without rendering them "comic...even libelous [sic]" (795). This internal discord is probably responsible for producing the unique tone of a West work, that of the (seemingly) nihilistic moralist. He pities his subjects, but harbours no illusions about their flawed characters; he also sees the comic potential of even the greatest suffering.

In West's only other major work, *The Day of the Locust*, the scene shifts from New York to Los Angeles, but the same sort of characters—the grotesque, the marginalized, the physical and spiritual cripples of the world—reappear, and again West performs the trick of portraying them as ugly and ignoble, but somehow in their baseness eliciting the reader's most tender emotions. Consider Faye Greener, the opportunistic aspiring young actress. She is described as

being absolutely without redeeming qualities, but, as the main character Tod puts it, “Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed” (West [1939] 2009: 104). This impression is something that West achieves for many of his characters, and he does so without probing very far into their individual psychologies. Instead, usually only their unflattering physical descriptions are given. If the reader is able to feel any empathy for them, it is only because West indicates that they are more-sinned-against-than-sinning. West’s brutal sense of humour, as conveyed through the miseries his characters undergo, “is a way of saying that the universe is always rigged against us and that our efforts to contend with it invariably lead to absurdity” (Podhoretz [1964] 1994: 81). This type of thinking contains a recognizable element of Stoic ethics, communicating the tacit message that there is a sort of dignity in enduring inevitable pain.

This study is an extended attempt at answering the question I pondered four years ago, upon initial reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts*: why does reading West somehow encourage moral inquiry, even while the author appears to be contemptuous of humanity? Humanist ethics are typically based in an essential respect for the individual and his or her capacity for growth,<sup>ii</sup> but West does not seem to share this core value. His ethics is not grounded in the idea that all people are worthy of respect; it is grounded in the idea that all people suffer, which is also identified in Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) as the only possible basis for human solidarity. Wayne Booth’s friendship metaphor for reading literature is useful here. Booth spent much of his career trying to explain “the curious experience we have when the time we spend

with others [meaning both people and books] seems to provide a simple clear answer to the question, What is life for?" (2001a: 100). To me this feeling, so real but so difficult to articulate, lies at the heart of the best reading experiences. The following explorations have one aim: to get to the philosophical core of West's works, and in my opinion, this is still best accomplished primarily through updated moral thematics, close reading, and historicist study. From this viewpoint, West is conceived of as an ethicist, and the present study's major goal is to discover the type of ethics peculiar to him.

There are several reasons why an ethical approach to West makes sense for the critic. Self-evidently, his novels deal almost exclusively with the problem of human suffering, a favourite topic for ethical inquiry throughout history. Moreover, there is evidence that this was how West conceived of his work himself. According to most of his biographers, West was attracted to other writers in and outside the canon who dealt with the problems of human suffering and morality. He was especially drawn to the works of Dostoevsky, and in the late '20s was involved with a group of young Jewish-American intellectuals who gathered in the home of one George Brounoff in Central Park West to drink tea and passionately discuss Russian literature and the arts (Martin 1970: 114). The young group praised Dostoevsky and Tolstoy's humanity and believed that human harmony and brotherhood could be achieved. West was sympathetic, but he did not wholly buy into their idealism. Apparently, he sometimes mocked this literary salon to other friends, and even organized another short-lived group, whom he called, satirically, "The Prince Myshkinites" (116). This anecdote is one of many examples revealing the constant pull in West's nature between the yearning idealist and the ironist. He desperately wanted to believe, but he thought that the believers were hopelessly naïve.

Serious evaluations by West of his own work are rare. There is next to nothing of the sort in his personal correspondence and other collected writings, or even in his biographies. Most of West's references to his novels are light, comic, and superficial, or alternately, gravely fixated on finances and publicity, and there are absolutely no essays by the author on his works in existence. West did publish "Some Notes on Miss L." in *Contempo* magazine, but as he stated himself in the same notes, it was not a proper review. It was just what its title indicated, a few (very few) brief notes on Miss *Lonelyhearts*' style mainly, and his own thoughts on the appropriate form and length for modern American fiction. One small clue about how he regarded his writing is found in a letter to the magazine editor and critic M.K. Abernathy. In it, West described his soon to be released novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, as a "moral satire" (quoted in Martin 1970: 152). Similarly, upon the novel's release, his close friend and literary mentor Josephine Herbst perceptively reviewed it as "a sort of allegory" ([1933] 1994) for modern life in which the characters were "types" (58) only, "representatives of a great Distress" (59). W.H. Auden (1971) would echo these observations some 40 years later.

Allegory, like fables, parables and the like, is a classic genre of morally didactic literature. "Allegory" is composed of two Greek root words, compounded to literally translate to something like "speaking otherwise than one seems to speak" (Hultgren 2000: 12). Cicero was the first recorded Latin to afford it the rhetorical meaning that it holds today: a sustained or continued series of metaphors (Whitman 1987: 265). Clearly, West's works contain allegorical elements, although whether any of them, even *Miss Lonelyhearts*, qualifies precisely as a moral allegory is doubtful. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* owes more to Dadaism than the allegorical tradition, and *A Cool Million* is a clear example of satire (interestingly, another type of didactic literature and thus another indication of West's ethical preoccupation). As for *Miss Lonelyhearts*

and *The Day of the Locust*, both lack the unity and sustained quality of a proper moral allegory like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In such works, virtually every character and plot point serve as symbols contributing to the overall meaning of a larger metaphor. Northrop Frye describes the true allegory as a "contrapuntal technique"—every image corresponds with some moral precept (1957: 90). Nonetheless, as discussed in the chapters to follow, *Miss Lonelyhearts* uses personification, allegorical type-naming, and the dream-vision convention, and *Balso*'s hero at least begins his narrative on a journey paralleling spiritual growth—until this allegorical framing device is abruptly dropped mid-novel. The fact that Herbst and Auden have at least used the term allegory in reference to West's works is significant, even if they did not elaborate on its formal similarities to the genre. It is reasonable, given West and his friends' and critics' own sense of his novels as having moral significance, that their ethical themes be highlighted and subjected to sustained inquiry.

Another reason why this type of criticism is useful in understanding West's work is connected to the modern question of what Richard Rorty refers to as "contingency." This issue will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, but for now it is enough to give its broad outlines. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty lays out the dilemma of today's liberal ironist, someone who believes that his "final vocabulary" (defined as "a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" [73]) is absolutely "contingent" on his milieu, social class, time in history, and more. According to Rorty, such an ironist lives with the uncertainty that his or her final vocabulary may be the wrong one (75). Liberal ironists are the sort of people who nervously qualify their every statement with a "from my perspective," or "it might be said," or have the trick, as West's friends said he did, of speaking clichés in quotation marks, as if humorously disputing their accepted meaning (Sanford

[1997] 2009: 191). Although irony is frequently used to express moral outrage in literary works (particularly satires), as Rorty points out, there are limits to what the absolute ironist—like West—can accomplish in terms of inspiring human solidarity. Using Sartre’s term, he states that ironists are “meta-stable,” “never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of themselves” (73-74).

West, who in this and many other things might be viewed as a characteristic Modern, is an excellent example of this type. As mentioned, one of the hallmarks of his works is their nervous oscillation between two conflicting worldviews: what might be called compassion versus cruelty, idealism versus cynicism, or pessimism versus optimism. This is achieved in large part through his use of irony, which can be defined generally as, “ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning” (Muecke 1969: 53). Besides *The Day of the Locust*, which is notable for almost abandoning the ironic mode entirely (Comerchero 1964: 132), West’s other works all make use of frequent ironic statements and characterizations. In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, central characters habitually speak ironically. In *A Cool Million*, the omniscient narrator is the chief ironist. As stated, although irony and morality are by no means at odds with one another, interpretation troubles can arise when the sheer ferocity, or alternately, the insouciance of the author’s irony affects the tone of the text as a whole. In *A Cool Million*, for example, the omniscient narrator remarks in passing, “...it is lamentable but a fact, nevertheless, that the inferior races greatly desire the women of their superiors. This is why the Negroes rape so many white women in our southern states” (West [1934] 2006: 93). The

professional West reader would readily identify this passage as an instance of the author satirizing a particular racist worldview, but for the lay-reader, a steady stream of such statements might leave an altogether different impression.

Put in Rorty's terms, West's works exhibit a struggle between the liberal's hopefulness for humanity, and the ironist's uncomfortable understanding that their perspective is limited, and their vocabulary is inadequate, and they are therefore fatally incapable of ever fulfilling these hopes. For liberal ironists like West, the use of irony is a defensive gesture. It is a way of communicating one's own ethical imperative without coming across as unsophisticated, over-earnest, or moralizing. Like Claude Estee in *The Day of the Locust*, West the authorial persona, and based on many accounts, West in real life, was "the master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit" ([1939] 2009: 72).

The best examples of West the implied author as liberal ironist can be found in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In this work, the third person narrator remains neutral and un-ironic, mediating between the two extremes of the earnest idealist, Miss Lonelyhearts, and the unrepentant cynic, Shrike, who only speaks ironically. For example, Shrike counsels his desperate columnist to "give your readers stones...Teach them to pray each morning: 'Give us this day our daily stone'" (West [1933] 2009: 5). The two characters, who are counterpoints to one another, can also be viewed together as the divided consciousness of the liberal ironist, moving between absolute irony and absolute seriousness. Although Shrike's is arguably the most compelling voice, the overall impression of the two voices is one of moral confusion—the moral confusion of the liberal ironist. From Miss Lonelyhearts' perspective, Shrike is an amoral tormentor; from Shrike's perspective, Miss Lonelyhearts is a childish fool. West wrestles with the problem of



contingency through the narrative strategy of balancing conflicting viewpoints through their respective agents.

If West's struggle with contingency is also modernity's, exploring it is a worthwhile project because it sheds light on human behaviour in the world today. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Shrike the cynical editor tells a colleague, half in jest and wholly in earnest: "Goldsmith, you are the nasty product of this unbelieving age. You cannot believe, you can only laugh. You take everything with a bag of salt and forget that salt is the enemy of fire as well as of ice. Be warned, the salt you use is not Attic salt, it is coarse butcher's salt. It doesn't preserve; it kills" (West [1933] 2009: 44). In lines like these and others, perhaps most directly in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, West's novels all express serious concerns over what he perceives as the modern state of affairs in which a totalizing irony pervades our communications with one another. His works frequently make the Rortian suggestion that unmitigated irony can poison human relations. This is despite the fact that he himself habitually uses heavy doses of irony in his fiction and in his personal communications.

Ethical criticism highlights ethical questions in works, how the implied author expresses and "resolves" them (see Chapter One for elaboration on this process), and encourages sustained reflection on a work's artistic expression of philosophical questions. In essence, much of what good ethical criticism does is to distil a work down to its ethos, or character, the very real, if difficult to pin down "sense of life that animates the text as a whole" (Nussbaum 1995: 4). A work's ethos is more often felt by the reader at a visceral level, than an intellectual one, and ethical criticism seeks to articulate these feelings more lucidly, and in a rhetorically defensible way. The constant sympathy versus misanthropy battle being waged in West often obscures what I believe is the overall ethos of compassion of his novels. By focusing on the profound

ethical questions that are actually being posed here—questions often overshadowed by West’s predilection for the crude and violent in order to express them—these important aspects of his work become more evident. So in summary, West’s works demand ethical consideration mainly because: a.) they possess explicit ethical content; b.) they display allegorical features; c.) such criticism yields insights into the age of irony and contingency in which we readers, like West, live; and d.) such an analysis draws attention to noteworthy aspects of the novel that have gone overlooked in recent decades.

### **I. Ethical Criticism is Dead; Long Live Ethical Criticism!**

For these reasons, a criticism concerned chiefly with ethics, which can be defined as a philosophical study (or systematization) of morals<sup>iii</sup>, not simply morals (or value judgements) themselves, is necessary to analyze West. Firstly, just what is meant by the term “ethical criticism?” Ethical criticism is a vast territory, an extremely elastic umbrella term, reaching as far back as the ancient Greeks. For the limited purposes of this thesis, we will confine ourselves to a late twentieth/early twenty-first century understanding of the term, the period of its supposed resurgence, after its precipitous decline in the mid-twentieth century,<sup>iv</sup> and even then the task of defining ethical criticism is daunting. Unlike the post-World War Two critical schools—New Criticism/formalism, cultural studies, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, psychoanalytical criticism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and feminist criticism, to name only a few—the ethical criticism of today does not exist as one fully unified intellectual movement. It has no Mecca: no Vienna, no Paris, not even a New Haven, where ethical criticism was founded and flourishes. There is no single founding text: no *Of Grammatology*, no *The Second Sex*, no *Well-Wrought Urn*. Nor is there a founding father or mother—unless we consider Aristotle, who, as

in so many areas of intellectual inquiry, is the father of us all. Perhaps most detrimental of all, in these theory-obsessed times, ethical criticism has no recognized methodology, and no accepted vocabulary in which to carry it out.

Despite these handicaps to definition and growth, few deny that the ethical approach has been re-legitimated in the world of literary criticism in recent decades. As Michael Eskin (2004: 557) proposes, one convenient date for its modern revival—the moment, at least, when ethics “went public” on the academic stage—might be *New Literary History*’s 1983 special issue, “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy.” A current of interest would be maintained over the decades that followed. In the summer of 1998, *Style* ran a “Literature and Ethical Criticism” issue, with essays from such leading authorities and staunch proponents of this type of criticism as Wayne Booth, Daniel Schwarz, Marshall Gregory, James Zachary Newton, and James Phelan, among others. Another real sign-post in the history of this inchoate movement, and a perhaps more intellectually neutral articulation of the new ethical criticism than that put forth by *Style*’s contributors, was Lawrence Buell’s Introduction to *PMLA*’s 1999 special topics issue on ethics and literary study. Like most commentators on the subject, it notes the resurgence of this topic in literary criticism, even while acknowledging the difficulty of defining it due to the broadness of its application (Buell: 7). Buell identifies six different strands of renewed ethical interest in literature: 1.) the continuation of the venerable (my word, not Buell’s) tradition of moral thematics; 2.) literary study’s turn toward philosophy and vice-versa; 3.) the re-evaluation of deconstruction as potentially ethically unsound following the revelation of De Man’s Nazi-collaborationist war journalism; 4.) the Derrida-Levinas dialogue on the concept of responsibility to the other as first philosophy; 5.) the shift in emphasis in the later works of Foucault from “the power-knowledge problematic and on the construction of social selves by discursive

macroinstitutions to the care of the self conceived as an ethical project”; and finally, 6.) a concern with professional ethics (7-10). (Note: this thesis falls largely within the realm of strands one and two. The others are tangential to our project, although the Levinas-Derrida dialogue, carried out mainly by poststructuralist literary scholars,<sup>v</sup> is discussed at some length in the Conclusion.)

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “ethical turn”<sup>vi</sup> was fully recognized in the academy, if still not fully defined due to the diversity of its practitioners’ methods. Quality readers of contemporary ethical criticism began to appear, indicative of the fledgling movement’s growing need for collective theoretical definition. The most notable of these readers are Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack’s *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (2001) and Stephen George’s *Ethics, Literature, and Theory* (2005). With the benefit of perspective, since its rebirth in the 1980s, it is also now possible to select a few of the most influential works of the new ethical criticism. Those would certainly include Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep* (1988), Tobin Siebers’ *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988), Martha Nussbaum’s collection of essays, *Love’s Knowledge* (1990), and Daniel Schwarz’s *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics* (1991), all of which are cited frequently in this study.

Attempting to synthesize the new ethical criticism is still a difficult task in spite of its fairly recent congealment into something more closely resembling a bona fide literary school. A few notable attempts have been made to understand individual scholarly efforts as part of a greater, loosely unified humanist project. One major author of such an endeavour is Daniel Schwarz, who has been called both a “progressive traditionalist” and a “pluralist,” both titles the critic accepts (1989: 1). Much of Schwarz’s career has been dedicated to defining this new type of criticism. Instead of referring to it as ethical criticism per se, a perhaps unsuitably broad term,

Schwarz refers to it as “humanistic formalism,” and situates it firmly within the Anglo-American critical tradition, from the late nineteenth century onward. Schwarz’s first major attempt at outlining and understanding this tradition, and its influence today, is in 1986’s *The Humanistic Heritage*, subtitled “Critical theories of the English novel from James to Hillis Miller.” In this important work, Schwarz surveys the criticism of a number of significant Anglo-American literary critics, including Henry James, Northrop Frye, Dorothy Van Ghent and Wayne Booth, the goal being the articulation of the common humanistic assumptions informing them all, despite their diverse approaches to studying literature. Schwarz writes: “While Anglo-American critics have not articulated a philosophic basis for their criticism, they have developed a methodology and principles—even, indeed, an implicit theory—that interprets, analyses, and judges novels effectively” (1986: 3).

Five unifying concepts of humanistic formalism are put forth by Schwarz, all of which stress the essentially mimetic nature of literature, and its grounding in real human lives. Schwarz’s key concepts include the following: that the form of a literary work expresses its content; that biographical and historical details about the author and their world are relevant, and can help the reader better understand the work; and that a work’s quality can be measured in part based on the inclusiveness of its vision (in terms of range and depth) (1986: 4). This study embraces these three concepts wholeheartedly. Schwarz’s master-list also includes two others that are a bit more controversial: that texts have an original meaning which can often be reached, or at least approached, by careful reading; and that human behaviour is central to texts and that the “psychology and morality” of characters can be understood and evaluated as if they were actual people like ourselves (4). Few critics today of any school would go so far as to claim that texts have *a single* original meaning—it is probably true, however, that ethical critics are more

likely to believe that certain readings (those that are rhetorically defensible, that are the product of scholarly consensus, etc.) have more validity than others. In regards to the second point, Schwarz probably loses many when he makes the claim that characters can be evaluated as if they were actual humans. In this dissertation, I proceed based on the (to my mind at least) more nuanced assumption that, for the purposes of ethical criticism, the morality of individual characters is much less important than the overall set of values propounded by the work as a whole.

Besides Schwarz, this study is inspired by other ethical criticism belonging to what Buell refers to broadly as the “moral thematics” tradition (1999: 7). Far from dead, this tradition is represented by such diverse practitioners as John Gardner, Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, James Phelan, David Parker, and even J. Hillis Miller to some extent (for example, see: “How to Be ‘in Tune with the Right’ in *The Golden Bowl*” in Davis and Womack’s reader, *Mapping the Ethical Turn* [2001]), as well as other scholars. This type of criticism varies greatly—from John Gardner as the arch-conservative example, who believes that “true art is moral” ([1989] 2000: 5) and that “Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are thus...the fundamental concerns of art and therefore ought to be the fundamental concerns of criticism” (144), to Miller, the deconstructionist who is careful to avoid generalizations and moral pronouncements. In his article on ethical themes in *The Golden Bowl*, Miller analyses James’ language and the characters’ speech acts in the novel, conscientiously trying to produce a responsible reading. Miller emphasizes that although his reading is “justified by the text,” it is also “interventionist, initiatory, inaugural, and in that sense unjustified” (2001: 283). He acknowledges that his ethical reading is wholly individual. Miller, who has described deconstruction rather broadly as “nothing more or less than good reading as such” (1987: 10), does not reject ethical readings out of hand, but always insists that they must

be situated firmly in the text, and that the critic's ultimate responsibility is to be a careful reader. This is discussed in his *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), which is less concerned with the ethical implications of works, and more concerned with the ethical implications of the act of reading itself. Comparing Miller's careful, textually-grounded approach to Gardner's more intuitive one (when asked how he would handle methodology in *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner replied, "When methodology breaks down, I bang on the table" [quoted in Johnson 2005: 256]), reveals, once again, just how different various modes of ethical criticism within the same broad tradition can be.

Another major influence, and the second strand of ethical criticism defined by Buell (1999: 8), philosophy as literature and vice-versa, is best exemplified, as he has noted, by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, as well as Adam Zachary Newton and David Parker. Nussbaum is likely the best known exemplar of this approach, arguing in many of her works, most notably, *Love's Knowledge* (1990), for the unique capacity of literature for invoking emotional and imaginative responses in the reader, and in so doing, sparking the moral imagination in ways that philosophical treatises cannot. In her essay, "The 'Ancient Quarrel': Literature and Moral Philosophy," Nussbaum recounts her own education, and how she was initially discouraged from merging literature and philosophy in graduate school, despite her natural inclination to do so (2005: 142). Nussbaum aligns herself with the Greeks, who did not compartmentalize philosophy and poetry into two different categories as the academy does today. She writes: "dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live" (Nussbaum 2005: 144). In her own literary essays, Nussbaum analyses works as sustained explorations of ethical questions, in line with James' description of the writer's task in

the preface to *The Princess Casamassima* as making an “intelligent report” of the intricacies of human social life (quoted in Nussbaum 1990: 139). Nussbaum’s work, though not without its detractors<sup>vii</sup>, represents another widely accepted and intellectually valid form of ethical criticism.

Contemporary ethical criticism is marked by its increased comfort in examining non-canonical texts. The first wave of ethical critics of the twentieth century are often associated with Victorian and pre-Victorian, essentially realist fiction—and it is fair to say that critics like Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum are in general more at home with Henry James than, for example, Haruki Murakami. (Morton Levitt’s *Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction* [2006] was in fact premised on the idea that Booth’s original *Rhetoric of Fiction*, brilliant though it was, was sadly prejudiced against modernist fiction, and needed updating.) In recent years several Wayne Booth disciples have applied ethical critiques to varied, more modern genres and works: James Phelan (2001), has explored the ethics of “Sethe’s Choice” in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, noting how authorial narrative techniques are used to guide the reader to particular, if non-definitive ethical appraisals. In a fairly recent issue of *College English*, Wayne Booth’s Aristotelian friendship model of criticism was easily applied to the works of, of all unlikely candidates, Hunter S. Thompson (Stiles and Harris 2009); he was weighed in the balance and not found wanting. Based on examples like these, it would seem that the newer ethical criticism of the twenty-first century is not confined solely to “old-fashioned”/canonical/overtly morally didactic works. In choosing to focus on the dark modernist (arguably postmodernist) Nathanael West, the present study reflects this welcome trend of greater diversity in subject-texts.

Modern ethical criticism can also often be recognized by its lack of interest in what is aptly called “theory.” In fact, some opponents of ethical criticism have made the claim that it exists in large part as a backlash against one particular type of theory, deconstruction—a retreat



to the safe pieties of the past in the face of an uncertain present. This is an unfair characterization, although it is certainly true that almost all ethical critics reject some of the key assumptions of deconstructionist and other related types of theory, as well as, more generally, what Wayne Booth refers to, as far back as *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, as the “befouled rhetorical climate which prevents our meeting to discover and pursue common interests” (Booth 1974a: 99).<sup>viii</sup> In this work, published in the early 1970s before deconstruction had really penetrated the American academy, Booth questions the intellectual assumptions of the day, identifying five “modern dogmas” contributing to this unhealthy environment. One of them is the cultivation of a rhetoric of “systematic doubt” (xi) as the proper attitude of the intellectual. Booth states (with a few important caveats) that meaningful, consensus-achieving discourse in the public sphere can only take place when this automatic scepticism is replaced by a “benign acceptance” of most reasonable, verifiable beliefs (40). Booth’s making-the-world-safe-for-rhetoric project is at odds, quite naturally, with those who disbelieve, *prima facie*, in the possibility of shared meaning, and thus, in the idea that beliefs ever can be “warrantable,” in Booth’s words (xiii). This includes the later American deconstructionists of the ‘70s and ‘80s, who tended to view texts as polysemic, signs as arbitrary, and meaning as unstable. The debate over the stability of meaning is one of the key issues separating ethical critics from deconstructionist, reader response<sup>ix</sup> and even New Historicist-influenced critics of today. (The latter of whom Booth would no doubt characterize as “motivists,” those who reduce an author’s statements of value to merely the rationalization of subconscious drives [24], or as the New Historicists and Marxists would have it, of ideology.)

Schwarz also questions contemporary academia’s heavy reliance on theory. He believes that humanistic formalists can learn a great deal from the theorists, but need not abandon their

own core assumptions about the essential mimetic nature of the text in the process. Theory, for him, is only useful insofar as it illumines the text, and theoretical study should never replace literary study. (“The question of why we should spend endless hours and course time reading Derrida is a real one. Once we have learned the basic lessons of deconstruction, are we not better off reading literary texts?” [Schwarz 1989: 154]). Most of Schwarz’s scholarly output contains explicit, sometimes vociferous criticisms of the excesses of theory. He even goes so far as to propose the new term, the “Theoretical Fallacy,” to describe “the phenomenon of speculating about texts from such a remote distance and at such an abstract level of discussion that the theories do not help the reader understand what is within texts” (Schwarz 1991: 15). He objects to theory that overshadows the primary text it was meant to explicate. The “fallacy” in question is the presupposition that theory is always a useful tool for better understanding literature.

One of Schwarz’s problems with poststructuralists’ emphasis on textuality—meaning, the focused study of the qualities of the text that identify it as a text—is that it can reduce criticism to language play (1989: 150). For Schwarz and other likeminded ethical critics, what a work *says* is overall more important than what a work *does*, and more or less stable linguistic meanings are assumed. This is similar to the difference between representational art and non-representational art. As others have stated, “The one points and says, Look what my finger is pointing at. The other says, Look at my pointing finger” (quoted in Segal 2000: xiv). Ethical critics believe that what the finger is pointing at is immeasurably more important than the finger itself.

Thus far, this partial survey of ethical criticism has focussed mainly on scholars in the moral thematics and related philosophy-literature merger schools as being of particular relevance

to this study. Kenneth Burke is another, somewhat more oblique influence. Although rarely discussed *at length* as an influence by most avowed contemporary ethical critics, the earlier work of Burke can undoubtedly be assimilated into the same school. In his oft-cited essay, Burke famously describes literature as “equipment for living” (1941: 293), and proposes his own version of sociological criticism. Burke states that proverbs exist as a way in which humans classify the world they live in. They may be designed specifically for “consolation,” “vengeance,” “foretelling,” (294-295) or a multitude of other reasons, but their general purpose is to name or chart a certain recurring social situation. Burke argues that this idea applies, a fortiori, to all works of literature. If proverbs can equip us for minor judgements (“a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”), works of literature, and more generally, manifold literary experience, can assist us in reaching deeper, more ethically-charged judgements. Classifying a situation—or as readers, reading this classification—provides a person with a symbolic strategic victory over a real-life problem. Arranging words and concepts into some cogent form indicates, on some level, some degree of mastery over a situation. Burke’s sociological criticism would consist of codifying the various naming strategies employed by authors, and thus grouping seemingly incongruous works together based on their social purpose (i.e. whether they exist to exhort, to admonish, etc.).

All of this fits with Burke’s overall conception of literature as a mediation, rather than a reflection of reality; our terminologies build our worlds, and we can only understand another’s motives when we also understand the symbols they use. What Burke has in common with other ethical critics is a holistic (or interdisciplinary) approach to literary studies: to him the scholarly analysis of books and other forms of discourse should be based on their sociological value as human responses to the world around them. As a “symbol-using animal,” (Burke [1966] 1968:

3), humans are set apart from other animals in their strategic use of language to solve conflict, encourage cooperation, gain advantages over others, and simply survive and thrive in a social environment. For Burke it might be said that literature has an implicit ethical component because it proposes various strategies for coping with the world, and any discussion of ethics is at heart a discussion of the weighing of values.

As other ethical critics of the twentieth century are wont to assert, notably Wayne Booth decades later in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* ([1961] 1968), Burke does not accept the view of some aesthetes that it is possible to produce a non-didactic art, or write a non-didactic literature. He believes that all art has an ideological component; values are presented either overtly or covertly, but they are always there. In the polemical “The Nature of Art Under Capitalism” essay, written in his earlier, Marxist-sympathetic days, Burke lists seven propositions in support of his larger argument that propaganda (n.b.: Burke’s propaganda lacks most of the negative connotations the term has acquired today—it means something more akin to explicitly persuasive communication), not the supposedly pure art for art’s sake, is the better tool for the social education of the public. The supposedly non-propagandistic pure art can actually be more dangerous than propaganda, because it unconsciously communicates certain assumptions. In Burke’s essay, these assumptions are regarding the innate acceptability of capitalist paradigms. Burke states, “Since pure art makes for acceptance, it tends to become a social menace in so far as it assists us in tolerating the intolerable. And if it leads us to a state of acquiescence at a time when the very basis of moral integration is in question, we get a paradox whereby the soundest adjunct to ethics, the aesthetic, threatens to uphold an unethical condition” (1941: 321). Art and literature, Burke points out, are only as innocuous as their “underlying moral system” (321).

Returning to the larger subject, it is fair to say, Schwarz's work notwithstanding, that ethical critics have been more successful in articulating what they oppose in literary criticism, rather than what they unreservedly celebrate as a group. Ethical criticism itself has no single structure, no single theory, and no obvious beginning (or end-point?). But this is not always a liability. One is reminded of the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers), whose Liberal branch, at least, abhors dogma, and is governed instead by what has been called the "absolute perhaps," the idea that only uncertainty, pluralism, and constant seeking are appropriate for a progressive religion (Dandelion 2008: 83). Somehow, like the Quakers, a creedless sect, ethical criticism persists, and, also like the Quakers, such critics often recognize one another by the spirit of their scholarly work, not its methodology or jargon. For this reason, moral philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, rhetoricians like Wayne Booth, writers and literary critics like T.S. Eliot, might all be called ethical critics.

Ethical criticism's lack of uniformity might even be a distinct advantage. Many critical schools seem to be lodged within a certain historical moment, and seem less relevant over time. Their practitioners are eventually scoffed at as old-fashioned, and their buzzwords become clichéd. In short, they are subject to the vagaries of academic fashion. Not being trendy, or even entirely identifiable, might work in the favour of ethical criticism; it is always and never *au courant*. Its malleability as a concept makes it difficult to criticize. It exists under numerous guises, and pops up every decade or so with a new public face. It is also, arguably, the most intuitive form of criticism. As Marshall Gregory points out, the "formalistic view that novels are about language, not about life, fails to explain why people get so caught up liking and disliking different fictional characters or why they deeply desire specific resolutions to certain fictional plots and situations" (1998: n.p.). The lay-reader's tendency to judge novels based on personal

ethical considerations should not be automatically castigated as a “naïve” response to literature, but explored as one meaningful way of actively reading and responding to a text—by using it as a testing-ground for one’s own ethical principles.

Certainly now, more than ever, with so many humanities faculties being trimmed, pinched, and sometimes forced to justify their very existence, the resurgence of a “practical” criticism that explicitly connects literature to human life is very welcome, in and of itself, and as a public relations tool. Now is the time to truly liberalize the liberal arts, and one way to do so is to dispense with unnecessarily opaque language, and highly specialized vocabularies that may serve to discourage the burgeoning scholar from studying English literature.<sup>x</sup> Another way is to encourage a more ethics-based interest in literary works, so that students might see that a five hundred year old Shakespearean play is more *relevant* to their lives, in a fundamental way (characters making difficult moral choices in their lives, just as they do), than a computer science course that will be obsolete in a year, or a business communications course whose philosophical premises may be morally questionable.

## **II. An Ethics of West**

The present study is chronological, but as a natural structuring device, not necessarily to show a progression in the scholarly project (although an artistic progression of sorts is definitely evident in the works themselves). West’s novels are examined in order of their publication, from *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* in 1931 to *The Day of the Locust* in 1939. The latter novel marked the end of his brief writing career—the author and his wife Eileen McKenney died in a car accident in December 1940, driving back to their home in Los Angeles after a weekend of hunting in Mexico (Martin 1970: 3). Each elucidates aspects of the Westian ethos, as exhibited

in the work in question. Certain themes are maintained throughout West's abbreviated oeuvre, for example: the sterility of modern life; the betrayal of the American Dream and the latent violence of American culture; the impossibility of art, culture, or the media mitigating human suffering; and lastly, most importantly, perhaps, the human need for dreams in the face of all this suffering. A variety of approaches to the task of examining Westian ethics are employed, but the common method for each is some form of ethical criticism.

By ethical criticism, to be clear, I do not typically mean mainly making explicit value judgements about the actions of West's characters, or even of the implied author. This latter sort of ethical evaluation is only carried out once, briefly, in the conclusion of the first chapter, and with numerous caveats (mainly, that this is my personal opinion, not a scholarly one.) No attempt will be made to judge the individual characters' actions, which many scholars would contend is a naive approach to ethical criticism. (Although it is common practice for the lay-reader, and I am not convinced that this intuitive appraisal is necessarily wrong.) Instead, I will operate on the premise that a discernible set of values and moral considerations can be discovered in all works, and that my role as an ethical critic is to bring them to the forefront for *consideration*, as opposed to judgement. As I put it in the first chapter, what ethical questions are asked in the work in question, and how does the implied author answer them?

A note on terminology: throughout this dissertation, I have endeavoured to use the word "ethics," rather than "ethos" when discussing the particular set of values being dramatized in each West work of fiction, to avoid the misperception that I am referring to the flesh and blood writer's actual character. Although these terms are often used more or less synonymously by critics, even ethical critics who should know better, their rhetorical trajectories are distinct, and their relationship to another term frequently used in this study—"implied author"—is also quite

different. These distinctions are made quite clear in a forthcoming Brian Jansen (2013) essay on Augustinian ethos in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Virtually all English and Communications scholars are well aware that Aristotle's three basic modes of persuasion in *Rhetoric* are logos, pathos, and ethos, with the last term usually roughly defined as the character of the speaker. Not everyone, however, realizes that the Aristotelian concept of ethos, unlike that of Augustine, Cicero or Quintilian, is based entirely on "what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak" (2004b: 7). Jansen explains it thusly: "For Aristotle, rhetorical ethos is contained exclusively in the character as revealed through the speech, suggesting his concern lies primarily with entechnic (artistic, or embodied in art) rather than atechnic (or non-artistic) modes of persuasion" (n.p.). Wayne Booth's implied author concept is virtually identical to Aristotle's notion of entechnic ethos (the only difference being that one refers to the author, and the other, the speaker). In summary, "ethics" in this dissertation, as stated above, refers to the examination of a set of moral judgements; the "implied author," refers to the entechnic (confined-to-the-text) ethos of a work; and "ethos," on the very few occasions it is used, is meant only in the most commonplace, obviously non-Aristotelian sense, as the distinguishing character of something or someone.

My sort of ethical querying is a much pared-down version of James Phelan's conceptualization of the four layered "ethical situations" of a narrative: the ethical dimensions of the characters' actions; the narrator's ethical stance in the telling of them; the implied author's ethical relation to his or her audience; and finally, the flesh-and-blood reader's response to the first three elements as a whole (2005: 23). The final two ethical situations are of the most concern to me. The first two are of interest only insofar as they affect the others, and reveal something about the underlying ethical principles conveyed in the novel as a whole. For this



reason, I can acknowledge great cruelty on the part of Nathanael West's characters without hesitating to laud any one of his works as compassionate: as discussed in Chapter Two, the presentation of cruelty itself can be an ethical act because it potentially shocks the reader out of indifference.

In the first chapter on *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* I conduct what might be called an experiment in ethical criticism. Using West's critically-maligned and rhetorically unclear juvenile work, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* as my sample text, I carry out an exacting probe of its ethics to discover whether the tools of ethical criticism can help overcome early readerly repugnance, and along the way, whether it is possible to generate scholarly knowledge based on this method. The work can be considered a dream narrative; it is also Dadaist-inspired and situated within the late-modernist American tradition—all elements that must be taken into consideration in the process of analysis. As I do throughout this thesis, I rely heavily on the theory of the late twentieth century wave of ethical critics, especially Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, who promote a neo-humanistic criticism based primarily on uncovering a text's ethos, not assessing texts based on some ethical scheme located outside of them. In this chapter, particular emphasis is placed on the idea of "surrendering to the text," emotionally and intellectually, and opening oneself up to the possibility of character identification, two ideas espoused by many ethical critics as being critical to engaged reading.

The second chapter, on what is generally viewed to be West's masterwork, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is the centerpiece of this study. In it, I most vigorously defend my larger thesis that West the implied author is best conceived of as a misanthropic ethicist, a "sad moralist" in the words of Josephine Herbst ([1961] 1971: 25), and that his works are therefore well suited for a criticism focussing on the ethical values they convey. This chapter aims to answer one of the

major unresolved questions of West scholarship: does his work, particularly the emotionally-wrenching *Miss Lonelyhearts*, have any redemptive value? Or, in other words, does West's dark vision allow for any hope for the humanist, or is it entirely negative? In the past, the work has typically been viewed in one of two ways by critics: as an existentialist lament, and in more recent years, as a cultural critique. Drawing on the theory of Richard Rorty and Jacques Ellul, I make a case for the novel's ultimate redemptive value, in an ethical sense, because of its potential to inspire the reader to consider the cost of indifference to human suffering. Also, as I do in Chapter Four with other sources, my use of philosophers and cultural theorists to illuminate the ethical content of West's work in this chapter is meant to demonstrate the claim of many contemporary ethical critics that literary works are dramatizations of particular philosophical values. As such, it is appropriate to explicate literature using philosophical secondary sources, and vice-versa, to explicate philosophy using literary examples, as Martha Nussbaum does so frequently in her scholarly work.

The third chapter focuses on what is commonly regarded as one of West's slighter works, *A Cool Million*. Unlike his other, highly original and idiosyncratic novels, this one fits most easily into a recognizable genre, the satirical novel. It is an obvious reversed Horatio Alger tale. In this chapter, I examine the work as the author's ethical critique of one of the more harmful of American social myths, the Success Myth. In itself, this type of analysis is not novel; critics of the past two decades have focussed on this book as West's condemnation of American consumer culture. What sets my approach apart from the bulk of existing criticism on *A Cool Million* is that I point to the unusual role the Indian characters in it are made to play—that of privileged ethical arbiters. This is highly appropriate for several reasons, not the least of which is the unusual place the socially, physically and economically marginalized Indian nonetheless holds in

the collective cultural imagination of the American people. As Leslie Fiedler and other scholars have pointed out, the American Dream is predicated on the destruction of America's first citizens, the Native peoples. The very presence of the Indian on the continent is a constant ethical reproach to the idea of American exceptionalism, material "success" and the Manifest Destiny doctrine, a psychological truth that West grasped and used to fine effect in the novel.

In the fourth chapter on West's final, best-known work, *The Day of the Locust*, discussion turns to W.H. Auden's landmark essay, "West's Disease" (1971), in relation to the author's final novel. Auden's explicitly ethical reading of West's works is that all of his central characters suffer from "West's Disease," a pathological, reality-denying wish-making. Expanding on Auden's claims, I argue that the novel's subject is indeed pathological dreaming, but that this is actually the implied author's ethical pronouncement on the spiritual emptiness of American life in the 1930s, rather than a criticism of misguided individuals as Auden claims. Among other things, the specific philosophical view being expounded in this novel is that personal fulfillment cannot be found in material things. In support of this view, West explicitly presents Hollywood as a debased secular substitute for religion in *The Day of the Locust*. West's constant paralleling of Hollywood and religion serves to show how both are human creations made to satisfy the religious impulse. I will also use the insights of cultural theorists including Baudrillard, Benjamin and Jameson to show how the architecture and geography of West's Los Angeles exists as a projection of the wishers' aspirations and therefore serves a utopian function not dissimilar to the religious impulse.

In the conclusion, I muse on the unchanging nature of West's work, noting that his projected fifth novel would likely not have been a departure in any significant way thematically, or in terms of ethical content, despite his vow to change his approach. I then suggest several

other areas for potential research, including West's American literary genealogy, in particular, the influence of Sherwood Anderson. Of particular interest for future work is the possibility of applying Levinasian theory to West. Levinas's understanding of ethics as "first philosophy"—the idea that responsibility for the other comes before any other human consideration, even before the lofty goal of discovering the Truth—may offer some sort of resolution to the question of existential suffering pondered in all of West's novels, especially *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

### **III. Beyond West: The Ethical Usefulness of Stories**

The above is the framework of this project, which is essentially a drawing-out of West's particular set of ethics as a writer, as well as, more generally, a comprehensive reading of his novels, engaging the existing body of West criticism. This work is intended as an in-depth single author study. As I have endeavoured to explain, the thematic content of West's works makes him an excellent candidate for an ethical analysis. However, although West's writing lends itself very well to this type of criticism, other object-texts could have served the same purpose. In discovering new insights into West, I hope to simultaneously highlight the unique ability of the story to bring immediacy to ethical questions. A renewal of interest in ethical criticism goes hand in hand with a renewed joy in experiencing narrative. In Robert Alter's underappreciated 1989 work, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (title notwithstanding, the book is more than a polemic from one side of the culture wars), the author begins by lamenting the fact that the modern literary studies department has, oddly enough, to some degree turned away from reading literature in favour of reading theory. Without denying the usefulness of some theoretical sources, Alter sensibly asks that given the limited amount of time in a lifespan, should not a literary scholar devote more attention to writers rather than theorists (12)? The language of

criticism, he notes, “reflects an emotional alienation from the imaginative life of the text under discussion” (15). The rest of Alter’s work shows what sets the study of literature apart from discourse studies in general, with chapters providing technical examinations of character, style, allusion, structure and perspective. In the tradition of Alter and likeminded scholars, this dissertation advocates a return to an appreciation of stories for the aesthetic pleasures that can be derived from them, and most importantly, their unique power of transforming imaginative immediacy into ethical contemplation.

In Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” ([1936] 1969a), the literary critic-cum-philosopher laments the demise of the traditional oral storyteller in modern life. In prophetic words that could just as easily be applied as a critique to the contemporary Information Age, Benjamin states that, unlike the novel, oral storytelling is about contemplation, not just communicating information (89). He claims that information from novels does not resonate as stories do. It is quickly processed, then forgotten. Nonetheless, he seems to allow even written narratives some measure of the story’s ability to inspire thought. Benjamin writes that the reason for the reader’s all-consuming interest in some novels is not concern for another (fictional) person’s fate, “but because this stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate” (101). Benjamin is referring to the phenomenon whereby readers identify with the character and suffer through their trials with them, because these dramatized fictional events can somehow elicit emotional responses beyond those we feel about our own seemingly mundane lives.

Kenneth Burke makes rather similar arguments from a different perspective in the “Psychology and Form” chapter of *Counter-Statement* ([1931] 1968). In it he claims that the tremendous growth of science in the past century has influenced artistic and literary criticism in

such a way that the erstwhile “psychology of form” has been eclipsed by the new “psychology of information” (33). Artistic form, which he defines essentially as patterns stimulating and then gratifying the audience (or reader’s) desires, is now frequently overlooked by the critic, who is more interested in the pure content, or objective information delivered by the author. Pure information in art is intrinsically interesting; however, it “cannot so much bear repetition since the aesthetic value of information is lost once that information is imparted” (35). Burke admires works that emphasize psychology of form over those that emphasize psychology of information because of their greater lasting aesthetic value. The latter type relies on the one-time surprise of the reader to generate interest, while the former typically relies on an eloquence of style that can be returned to again and again with enjoyment. Thus, Burke, like Benjamin, appreciates the unique *form of narrative* in revealing artistic truths more meaningful than the factual truths of mere information, an accumulation of facts. Burke proposes what is, in essence, a particular ethics of form. Through form emotion is translated into eloquence (41), and through artistic eloquence humans achieve the highest wisdom: “an address, a discourse, which can make our material life seem blatant to the point of despair” (44).

One scholar writes: “Literature does not expect its devotees to understand, but to identify. The power of the identification lies in the fact that the moral issue does not remain on the cognitive level, but becomes part of the reader’s personality and independence, *his or her own personal problem* (Yehoshua 2005: 19; italics added). This “I am my brother’s keeper” mentality is also demonstrated in Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fragility of Goodness* (2001). In this book, the author presents a collection of documents regarding the momentous political decisions in Bulgaria during World War Two leading to the prevention of the deportation of some 48,000 Jewish citizens to the Nazi death camps. Todorov attempts to answer the vital question of why

humanity triumphed in this European country alone (as well as Denmark, which also saved most of its Jews), when virtually every single other significant Jewish population on the continent was not protected by their respective national governments. Todorov provides no one absolute answer, but he does suggest that Bulgaria's five centuries of oppression under the Ottomans may have caused them to identify with their own Jewish minority, who they did not want to similarly oppress (31). Furthermore, Todorov muses that Dimitar Peshev, the Bulgarian Minister of Justice who played a key role in saving the Bulgarian Jews, may have been motivated by personally witnessing the persecution of the Jews under the Nazi-influenced anti-semitic laws the country instituted in the early years of the war: "...where once he had seen abstractions—rules, laws, regulations, Jews—he now saw individual faces, and they were faces of people who were suffering" (29).

This example illustrates the powerful ethical imperative arising from identification with other human beings. Among all art forms, the novel provides perhaps the most intimate and extended exposure to another's point of view and emotions. As Martha Nussbaum explores at length in *Poetic Justice*, this "literary imagination" is a potentially morally subversive force in public life (1995: 2). Echoing Aristotle, she notes the novel's unique "philosophical" capacity, as compared to social science writing, for showing the world not as it is, but as it might be (5), thus prompting an imaginative identification between the text and the reader. One cannot read a book and keep it at arm's length emotionally, as one might some other form of communication, like an economic treatise or work of philosophy. The literary text demands identification on an emotional level in ways these other texts do not.

"The storyteller," states Benjamin, "is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself" ([1936] 1969a: 109). This occurs in various ways. Besides identifying with the

characters, stories may cause thoughtful readers to ponder the ethical decisions they make in their own lives, and are thus helpful as teaching tools. Wayne Booth believes that all stories, sacred and secular, serve as moral teachers, writing, “...all of them teach, and thus in a sense they are open to moral inquiry, even when they do not seem to invite or tolerate it” (2001b: 20). They also reverberate—they stick—in ways more straightforward ethical instruction does not.

Examples are myriad. One professor of legal and ethical studies explains how stories help bridge the disconnect between the teaching of ethics and the practice of it (Jennings 2005: 166), and also mentions that years later, her students typically did not remember the technical terms they learned in her classes, but they did remember the stories she told as examples (170). In *The Call of Stories* (1989), Harvard professor and child psychiatrist Robert Coles discusses using books for therapeutic purposes as a doctor, and for stimulating the moral imaginations of both his students and his patients. Coles is only one of many pedagogues who has used literature in recent years to teach ethics. University courses with titles like “Ethics and Literature,” “Ethical Choices in Literature,” and the like, can now be found. Popular textbooks like the Oxford University Press’s *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (2011), now in its fourth edition, combine philosophy and literary texts to illustrate philosophical questions and invite classroom discussion. It is clear that on some North American college campuses, the link between stories and the consideration of ethical values continues to be emphasized.

It almost goes without saying that cultures throughout human history have used myths and parables to express ideas, transmit values, and otherwise make sense of their world. In contrast to the modern, mobile, disconnected and atomic self, removed from clan, nation, and history as a whole, Alasdair MacIntyre conceives of each human life as being embedded within a larger cultural (and cosmic) narrative ([1981] 2007: 221). In *After Virtue*, he argues that modern



human civilization is morally deficient and philosophically adrift. This is because it has abandoned belief in an Aristotelian teleology, only to attempt to justify the very same moral beliefs through secular Enlightenment thinking (256); this project has failed, as is most clearly articulated by Nietzsche. According to MacIntyre, Aristotelian and Christian ethics (based on unchanging, eternal virtues) are not rationally and independently derived, as the liberal universalists would have us believe, but traditional, tied to “the socially local and particular” (126). These eternal verities are communicated through the very human act of storytelling. He warns: “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (216). Like Benjamin, MacIntyre connects the existential confusion of modernity in part with the decline in storytelling, and the associated traumatic dissolution of the bonds of intergenerational cultural and religious traditions. Not only does he conceive of a single human life as a narrative, for him this life also exists within a larger, continuous cultural narrative. Stories are a necessary part of the happy, healthy human life because they provide what Wayne Booth would later call “patterns of desire” (1988: 272)—designs for living that individuals may choose to be shaped by, or alternately, choose to reject.

Similar views are propounded by Richard Kearney in *On Stories* (2002), in which the scholar argues that story-telling, or the “narrative imperative” (5) is an unquenchable need that always has, and always will be, part of human culture, although operating in different modes in a postmodern age (11-12). Like MacIntyre, Nussbaum and several others, Kearney explains how storytelling essentially *humanizes* time, changing it from disconnected moments into a larger, coherent and meaningful pattern (he uses the Greek terms to differentiate here—*zoe* is mere

biological human life, the accident of existence, and *bios* is a fully human one, existing as its own narrative). In the concluding chapter of *On Stories*, Kearney identifies five key functions of narrative, loosely derived from the classical terms appearing in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and still of value today when considering the importance of stories in understanding human lives. These functions are the following: "plot (*mythos*), re-creation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*), and ethics (*ethos*)" (128). (Although it should be noted that Kearney's discussion of the ethical role of literature has little in common with Aristotle's use of the term *ethos* in *Poetics* or *Rhetoric*.) The present study devotes some time to all of these functions, if sometimes using different terms. Besides ethics, I particularly emphasize catharsis—or more often, a related concept, emotional engagement—as one of the unique positive qualities of the story, one which stimulates the reader, prompting them to worthwhile moral reflection.

Another perspective on the ethical usefulness of storytelling and story-reading comes from Mark Edmundson. Citing Proust and Emerson in *Why Read?*, Edmundson states that reading, and a liberal arts education in general, can help us discover ourselves or new potential selves (2004: 5). One might think of this as a second socialization, after our initial childhood socialization through parents, community, religion and culture. As clichéd as it may sound, reading does indeed put the individual in contact with other, distant worlds. This rings true when I consider my own personal experiences. I have often thought how different I would have turned out had my early intellectual and emotional development been based entirely on my immediate surroundings in rural New Brunswick. Quite simply, I would have become another person. The provincial educational curriculum, such as it was, played a part in my second socialization, but more importantly, my access to the random assortment of novels and non-fiction in my grandmother's upstairs "back chamber" also played a part. There I read trash and treasure alike,

indiscriminately. I read Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the Nancy Drew series, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, *The Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind*, *West Wind* and *The Good Earth*, Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (which to this day I know and like better than *Little Women*, simply because I read it first), countless L.M. Montgomery books, an illustrated Bible stories for children, the squeaky clean Christian romances of Grace Livingstone Hill, and many others.

All of these books provided me with peepholes into universes that were often very different from my own. I awakened to the fact—one that many people, even in our age of near-universal education and access to the internet never realize, or only pay lip-service to—that the landscape of my social world was entirely contingent on circumstance, and not inherently superior or inferior to those of millions of others. Of course, it is possible to realize this intellectually, when reading a news article, for instance; but a news article is not fully immersive in the same way a novel is, which frequently allows the reader privileged, *prolonged* access to its characters thoughts and feelings. As Benjamin noted, such media inform temporarily; they do not reverberate over time. I would argue that only a reasonably long narrative, fiction, non-fiction, or somewhere in between, has the power to fully imaginatively involve the reader in a different reality, thus expanding the horizons of their consciousness.

Storytellers provide an alternate script-for-living to their readers (or listeners). These scripts are set in diverse realms, realms with different social realities and ethical standards with which to compare to our own. Comparison invites moral contemplation, and converts all readers, in the wink of an eye, into ethical critics. Wholesale acceptance of a single narrator's version of reality by the reader is a rarity, as is complete rejection. But the closer we come to finding an articulation of an alternate reality that we embrace, the more that particular work is

loved and admired.<sup>xi</sup> In this case, this does not refer primarily to a writer's rhetorical or mimetic skill, or artistic ability, although all these skills are important. It means the overall ethics of a work: the set of moral questions and corresponding answers dramatized within its pages. Our understanding of the ethical sense of a work is what truly inspires devotion, revulsion, or indifference. Using the ethical method to explore Nathanael West is the best way to discover the sustaining vision behind his bitter and violent novels, why his alter-reality still appeals despite his dim view of humanity. Toni Morrison once wrote, in reference to *Huckleberry Finn*, that classic literature "heaves, manifests, and lasts" (2005: 288). We might agree that many well-written works "heave" and "manifest," but what "lasts" depends entirely on a work's governing ethics, and how we personally respond to it as ethicists, a term which only means, in the final estimation, human beings living and choosing in the world.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>This phrasing is borrowed from Josephine Herbst, who claimed that West “never ventured beyond the accusatory,” except in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the only one of his novels that offered “a possible ameliorative vision” of human life ([1961] 1971: 20). Although I agree that *Miss Lonelyhearts* is in some ways the least pessimistic of all of West’s works about the human condition, this thesis will argue that in fact *all* of his books share something of this positive, redemptive quality—if only in their portrayal of the human capacity to continue dreaming and struggling through despair.

<sup>ii</sup>See especially the influential Renaissance humanist text, Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1956).

<sup>iii</sup>One good explanation of the difference between ethics and morality, for they are often used more or less synonymously, is the following: “Morality consists mostly of our moral judgements, principles, values, and theories; and ethics is the careful, philosophical examination of them” (Pojman and Vaughn 2011: 1).

<sup>iv</sup>The reasons behind the decline of ethical criticism (at least in name) during this period are complex, but obviously related to the rise of other dominant intellectual paradigms and alternate forms of criticism, including New Criticism, some branches of modernism, and the rise of the theoretical schools in general. For a more complete explanation of ethical criticism’s mid-twentieth century eclipse, see especially Chapter Two of Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep* (1988), “Why Ethical Criticism Fell on Hard Times,” and Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s “Ethics” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995), the latter of which is briefly discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

<sup>v</sup>For more on the impact of the “ethical turn” within poststructuralist literary studies, see especially volume 38, number 3 of *SubStance*, “Ethics and the Inventive Work,” from 2009. Of special interest is Zahi Zalloua’s interview with Derek Attridge in which the latter outlines Levinas’ impact on his own thought, and treats Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek’s objections to Levinas’ ethics.

<sup>vi</sup>The idea of ethics returning, as if it were ever gone, has been disputed by some critics, notably Michael Eskin in his Introduction to *Poetics Today*’s special ethics issue in 2004. Eskin states that referring to the resurgence of ethics in literary study as a “turn” is sensationalism on the part of the critic (2004: 562). He notes that the moral issues raised long ago by Plato, Aristotle, much later critics like Kant, and most recently, Levinas and others, are now reappearing in the guise of popular academic buzzwords like “alterity,” “call of the other,” “ethical responsibility,” and more (561).

<sup>vii</sup>See Richard Posner's "Against Ethical Criticism" (2005), which is critical of both Booth and Nussbaum's approaches, as well as Nussbaum's reply, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism" (2001a).

<sup>viii</sup>Booth defines rhetoric in *Modern Dogma* as "the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse" (1974a: xiii).

<sup>ix</sup>One might reasonably think, given the typical ethical critic's endorsement of the legitimacy of personal reading experiences, that they would also admire at least some aspects of reader response criticism. To my knowledge, not a single well-known ethical critic of recent years endorses this school, or can even find major commonalities between their method and that of most of its critics. The key difference, among many, seems to be the two groups' wildly disparate views on the nature and limits of interpretation. Reader response critics tend to believe that text meaning is either wholly subjective and individualized, or, in line with Stanley Fish, that it is "interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings" (1980: 14). In either case, interpretation is situated wholly outside the text, in the emotional needs of the individual or the ideological needs of the interpretive community. Ethical critics, on the other hand, tend to adhere to some version of what Daniel Schwarz calls a "transactional" theory of reading, the view that "text and reader are engaged in a transaction where each does something to the other" (1991: 48). Interpretations may be as diverse as their readers, but because they are still grounded in the text, they are not endlessly indeterminate.

<sup>x</sup>From 1995 to 1998, *Philosophy and Literature* drew attention to this trend in the humanities toward the use of obscurantist, jargon-ridden prose to elevate often weak scholarship through its infamous "Bad Writing" contest. Past "winners" include such well-known academics as Fredric Jameson and Judith Butler.

<sup>xi</sup>Emerson believed that individuals recognized the best art and literature as self-reflections: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty" (1941: 120).

## Chapter One

### Wrestling with *Balso*: An Experiment in Ethical Criticism

“The pure products of America go crazy...”

—William Carlos Williams, “To Elsie”

“But, in fact, living and choosing in the human world are the only true subjects of literature.”

—Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism*

When Nathanael West gave his mother a copy of his first published novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, she provided a succinct and accurate early review that would turn out to be very similar to the later critical consensus: “All it says,” she said disgustedly, “is ‘stink, stink, stink’” (quoted in Martin 1970: 227). The bizarre, surreal and scatological novella about a young aesthete entering the anus and travelling through the innards of a Trojan horse was written with the intention to shock and disgust, and in that regard, at least, it succeeded brilliantly. Otherwise, it is generally regarded among critics, today and in 1931 when it was originally published, as a failure, a sophomoric effort by a young American modernist who would eventually write two novels of lasting interest and quality: *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939).

*Balso* presents a formidable challenge to the conscientious critic. Its dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream structure makes the tracing of a coherent narrative next to impossible. Its relentless witticisms (“O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead” [West [1931] 2006: 4], aimed at mocking the high modernist crowd, who West both envied and loathed in equal measure, become tedious very quickly. Not to put too fine a point on it, *Balso* is also considered by many to be sordid, pessimistic, violent, derivative, pseudo-

intellectual and pseudo-sophisticated, silly, and, greatest of all crimes, given the writer's intention of writing a satirical novel: it is profoundly unfunny. Even scholars well-versed in and appreciative of Dadaism, which is a major influence on the novel, are likely to view *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* as, at best, an attempted joke that did not come off. In short, *Balso* is the sort of work that tests a critic's open-mindedness and objectivity, his or her ability to throw off prejudice, and even initial repugnance, and consider a work fairly.

I, like many earlier critics of *Balso* (including, apparently, even the author's mother), must admit to some degree of readerly resistance<sup>i</sup>, even repugnance, upon initially encountering this work. Readerly resistance to certain works is a problem for many literary scholars. Few readers within the academy will admit to being—for all intents and purposes—prejudiced toward a text before they have even begun reading it, and yet, undoubtedly, after many years spent in the company of books, we have all built up our own sets of preferences and aversions to certain authors, perhaps even entire genres. Readerly resistance in this case is meant pejoratively, referring to a reader's initial resistance to a work based on its reputation, its author's reputation, its style, and/or the particular literary school with which it is associated. Scholarly readers who are resistant in this way will avoid reading certain works, or, if they do need to read them for some reason, will do so cursorily. They will be too apt to pick out the anticipated flaws of the work, while overlooking its better qualities. Reading with the critical consensus already in mind ("I expected *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be sickly sentimental, but historically significant..."), they will bring so many prejudices to the book, that their readings will inevitably be somewhat distorted. Initial resistance to a text is a major critical problem because it often prevents the reader from judging it on its own terms.



To clarify, there is a difference between a grounded preference and an unfair prejudice causing readerly resistance. After having read several of one author's works, and considering them carefully, it is reasonable and fair to form opinions that would influence our later decisions to venture further into an author's oeuvre or not—but the issue is that so many readers, even professional readers like academics, refuse to read certain texts outright, or refuse to *fully engage imaginatively* with texts which either offend their aesthetic sensibilities in some way, and/or have a negative reputation. This is one of the greatest of critical sins. As most instructors will tell their students, even if they do not practice what they preach, the ideal way to approach a text is to be completely open to it. C.S. Lewis describes this attitude as “receiving” art rather than “using” it toward our own predetermined end ([1961] 2010: 88).<sup>ii</sup> “The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is *surrender*,” states Lewis (19). This does not mean that we are to turn off our critical faculties entirely, becoming passive and sheep-like receptors. Lewis asks that we “surrender” to a literary work exactly as we might allow ourselves to become immersed in a piece of music, or fully involved in a play. This type of imaginative surrendering really just means something akin to the willing suspension of disbelief, or as stated in the Introduction, yielding to the immersive quality of the narrative. In so doing, the readers are enabled to perceive a given reality as the implied author does.

Some scholars go further with the idea of surrendering to a text. Mark Edmundson believes that the true critic should become a “disciple” of the implied author, able to guess their response to any situation through a full understanding of their worldview (2004: 89). For him this also involves “sacrificing some of his [the reader's] individuality to the thoughts and feelings of another,” (90), as well as “some measure of self-annulment” (91) for the critic. In my view, this is a step too far. Surrendering to a work means consciously yielding to its peculiar magic ,

but this can be done without obliterating one's own perspective and sense of self, which seems to be what Edmundson is advocating (albeit with some qualifications). Self-annulment is not necessary or desirable; we *should* be bringing our own rich, varied personal experiences to criticism—how can human beings do otherwise? The critic's goal should be understanding, a result of clear communication between two parties, and this can be achieved without one party losing their selfhood.

Perhaps the best word for the role of the conscientious reader and critic is “commitment,” a willingness to fully engage with the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of the implied author. C.S. Lewis describes the vicarious pleasures of reading, explaining the reason why many people read to begin with:

The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek *an enlargement of our being*. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself...We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with our imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as our own. We are not content to be Leibnitzian monads. We demand windows. ([1961] 2010: 137-138; italics added)

After this full entry into another world, which often involves a close identification with particular characters, we then begin the conscious analytical process.<sup>iii</sup> Wayne Booth calls this necessity the “paradoxical need to embrace in order to decide *whether* to embrace” (Booth 1988: 140). His two-step critical process is essentially surrendering to the work, then drawing back and analysing its content (what he calls understanding and then “overstanding” [Booth 2006: 195]). The full ideal sequence of action for readers is, therefore: commitment, engagement (while

reading), reflection, and then and only then, venturing to criticize a work. There are no shortcuts, at least no fair ones.

A significant proportion of critics of all schools are likely to agree to this approach to reading. It is particularly important that ethical critics, who are the most vulnerable to charges of moral parochialism, be willing to step outside their comfort zones when approaching a work, and strive to be as broadminded and fair as possible in their initial reading/s. This is the ideal critical process for ethical critics of literature, a group who can be very broadly defined as being united by “the premise of a strong connection between art and life” (Schwarz 2001: 5), and who believe that, by and large, writers write, and readers read to express ideas and gain insights into human life (Schwarz 1991: 2). Critics who share these general views, and espouse many of Daniel Schwarz’s (1991) five key concepts defining Anglo-American humanist criticism, for example Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and James Phelan, are only “ethical” in that they are particularly interested in uncovering and discussing a work’s defining moral character, or in Aristotelian terms, its entechnic ethos (among their other interests, that is, which for this trio are respectively rhetoric, moral philosophy and narrative studies). It should be further noted that there is all the difference in the world between the careful work of searching out a work’s ethical stance, and then weighing it as an individual, in a way that invites debate and discussion, and what ethical critics had a tendency of doing in the bad old days (the usual *bêtes noires* cited here are Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis), and are still frequently accused of doing today: dictating what a work should be and do, and castigating works that do not conform to their own moral standards—which they, of course, likely present as universal, not personal.

In this study, my goal is to use ethical criticism to analyse a work that I as a reader have been guilty of “resisting” in the past, the aforementioned *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. In

deliberately selecting a work that is critically unpopular, one that I have read many times but have always dismissed as, dare I state it, vulgar near-nonsense—my goal is to challenge my own prejudices, and in so doing, conduct an experiment in ethical criticism. I am concerned with the great questions ethical criticism must always ask, for example: “What is the nature of the voice that speaks to us; specifically, what are her or his attitudes, values, and feelings, and how does the artist convey them? What do we learn from the representation of human behaviour within that world?” (Schwarz 1991: 21). However, in this dissertation, explorations along these lines are secondary to answering my major question, seemingly a simple one: can using the tools of ethical criticism (as I conceive of the critical practice), help elucidate a difficult and disliked text? I am curious as to whether their careful application in this case will yield a different verdict. Can initial repugnance to a text be overcome? Furthermore, is it possible to actually generate knowledge from this method, and not just a very elaborate statement of personal liking or disliking?<sup>iv</sup>

Towards this end, with Schwarz’s five characteristics of humanistic formalism/ethical criticism in mind, this project is centered around two major questions: 1.) *What are the principal ethical questions dramatized in this novel?* and 2.) *How does the novel resolve them?* It should be noted that all works have an ethical component, if not thematically, then stylistically. As Tobin Siebers has pointed out, “The critical desire to free literature from ethics is an ethical gesture” (1988: 42). Choices regarding subject-matter alone are interesting because they indicate to the reader just what topics the author thinks are worth discussing. But it does not end here. How the author resolves the moral issues that arise through the course of a narrative’s development are also important, and by “resolve,” this does not necessarily mean reaching an explicit or conclusive resolution. Sometimes ambivalence is also a type of appropriate resolution

to difficult ethical questions, because ambivalence on the part of the author can indicate an implicit acknowledgment of the seriousness and complexity of the moral exploration—another moral stance—and it also allows the reader the freedom to consider the issues at hand on their own, and reach their own conclusions. Beginning with some early biographical context, including the genesis and publication history of the work, I will set out to highlight the ethical issues raised in this work—to figuratively grapple with *Balso*.

A final note before proceeding: in addition to all of the reasons given above, the ethics of *Balso* are difficult to discern because the work is also arguably a dream narrative. Dream narratives unfold with their own peculiar logic and set of literary conventions. Their structural coherence is much less rigid than other genres, using free associations, non-linear time, and stream of consciousness writing, among other literary techniques, to reflect the unfettered psyche at play. Nonetheless, although this genre, the dream narrative, is less conducive to ethical criticism than, for example, a religious parable (except, of course, for *allegorical* dream visions, another genre altogether), like all works it is still possible to pinpoint certain recurring areas of ethical concern as communicated by the implied author. Based on a close reading of the text, as well as some relevant secondary historical and bibliographical materials, certain patterns emerge. Even dream narratives engage in the dramatization of particular ethical questions, and *Balso* is no exception.

## **I. Context: The Genesis of *Balso Snell***

In 1931 at the age of 27, the young American modernist Nathanael West published his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Only 500 copies were printed by his small, independent publishing house, Contact Editions, and only under the provision that West himself

would purchase 150 of them (Meade 2010: 106). The novel was written, off and on, for five years by a young, unfocused West, frustrated in his career ambitions. He had romantic dreams of becoming a “serious” writer, even convincing his dubious, practical family to fund a Paris expedition of several months in line with West’s conception of the sort of bohemian education necessary for the young artist. The cosseted only son of an upwardly mobile, upper-middle class New York Jewish immigrant family, West was expected to become a successful professional or businessperson like many of his male cousins. His parents, especially his strong-willed mother Anna, had discouraged his writing. Instead, through nepotism, they eventually found their floundering artist manqué son employment as an assistant hotel manager (Martin 1970: 121). During these early years, West even tried his hand as a confectioner, coming up with the not surprisingly completely unprofitable idea of cactus-flavoured candy (106). These attempted careers were dead-ends, meant to placate his family while he pursued his real dreams during his free time.

Under these circumstances, West was desperate to have his first book released and establish himself as a writer, even if it meant essentially publishing it himself. He determinedly pushed *Balso* through publication, despite the fact that even his closest, most trusted literary friends had reservations about the manuscript, including S.J. Perelman (Meade 2010: 93) and John Sanford (107). Not surprisingly, *Balso* did not sell, and it was panned by the few critics who went to the trouble of reviewing it (although West always had an impressive defender in William Carlos Williams, who he worked under as an associate editor for the short-lived literary magazine, *Contact*). *Balso* would not be reprinted until Farrar published West’s complete works in 1957, spurring a revival of interest in a once-forgotten minor American writer of the ‘30s.

Most reviewers of West's day, even those supportive of experimental writing, were disgusted by the novel's bathroom humour, and confused by its ridiculous plot. In synopsis, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is the surrealist story of a young aesthete, the titular Balso, who journeys through the inside of a Trojan horse. The "journey" convention is of course an extremely popular allegorical framework, used in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and even Melville's *Moby-Dick*, to name just a few. The outer physical journey the character/s embarks upon typically represents their inner spiritual journey. West's novel appears to spoof the pious allegorical convention of the journey as a hard-fought, but ultimately successful battle for spiritual growth. His main character, after all, begins his journey by entering the Trojan horse's anus, but he never emerges on the "other side." In fact, West abandons the journey convention about mid-way through the narrative, after which time there is no further mention of this allegorical framing device.

At the beginning of the novella, Balso meets a series of rather bizarre, frustrated writers and academics, pining for an audience. They all either bore or revolt him. The rest of the narrative, such as it is, uses typically modernist devices, like dream sequences, a non-linear timeline, and the contents of letters to advance the plot, to no discernible end. *Balso* can be viewed as one long intellectuals' in-joke in which the protagonist eviscerates the Western canon, targeting the pretensions of the modernists in particular. In an interview about the book, West accurately said that it was meant as "a protest against writing books," (quoted in Martin 1970: 129), a criticism of the sterile, masturbatory world of the modern artist. By the '60s and '70s, when *Balso* was beginning to be examined again, many found the novel strikingly bizarre and unusual. West's friend and fellow writer Josephine Herbst claimed, to the contrary, that *Balso* was by no means singular during the '20s, when it was written. Regarding its reception, she

wrote that it was “so obviously a belated detonation from the ‘20s that it received little attention” (Herbst [1961] 1971: 15). A number of critics have stressed West’s commonalities with other modernists; some have pointed out that rather than being simply a critique of modernist “high art,” *Balso* is also the attempt of a young, unknown writer to join the ranks of the modernists (Cerasulo 2006: 60).

Overall, the critical opinion still prevailing today ranges from Harold Bloom’s appraisal of *Balso* as flat-out “squalid and dreadful” (2005: 1)<sup>v</sup>, to the slightly more generous appraisal of the first crop of West critics of the ‘60s and ‘70s like Victor Comerchero. Comerchero and company readily acknowledge *Balso* as a flawed work, but also claim that it is still important as “the key to all his later works” because it clearly reveals his literary influences, as well as his thematic interests and overall worldview, which do not change over time, though his style is refined (1964: 51).<sup>vi</sup> According to this popular view, *Balso* is an authorial pre-text, a sort of general “artist’s sounding-board” (Galloway 1964: 118). Today *Balso* is regarded as something of a modernist curiosity, and is rarely read outside the circle of devoted West scholars.

Who exactly was the young man behind the “dreadful” *Balso Snell*? One of West’s most obvious defining characteristics, especially at this early stage in his development as a person and as an artist, was his use of ironic masks to shield himself from the world. West was what might be called a constant “ironic poseur,”<sup>vii</sup> a self-conscious social performer. The pose is in part ironic because it is meant to be identified as an obvious pose. In adopting such a pose, West was no different from many other modernists of his age. Peter Nicholls (1995) traces the modernist sensibility to the French symbolists of the mid-nineteenth century and notes that many artists of the day consciously developed dual personalities to protect themselves from the onslaught of modern commercial life. Interpreting the writings of Baudelaire on the subject, Nicholls states



that the ironic pose of the dandy—which was one that West himself habitually adopted—was the heroic act of the cultural outsider during times of political transition. Disillusioned by the political world, the dandy asserts his authority in the realm of culture and aesthetics (11). For Baudelaire (and other proto-modernists), “this tortured disunity was the tragic condition of the modern poet, but it was also, in a curious way, his strength. The very nature of metropolitan life offered the opportunity...to make duplicity a sort of defence against the modern” (16).

All of the central characters in *Balso*, including the title one, are ironic poseurs, role-players living double lives, and there are some interesting biographical parallels between the ironic poseur-type that appeared so frequently in West’s novels, and the author himself. West, like one of his later protagonists, Todd Hackett, could well be described as “a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes” ([1939] 2009: 60). His real life was a case study in a subject’s multiple constructions of identity. He assumed many roles that might not have come naturally to a shy, and by all accounts almost comically physically awkward young Jewish man: while attending Brown University, that of the Brooks Brothers-clad Fitzgeraldian man-about-town<sup>viii</sup>, and later, after joint-purchasing a farm in rural Pennsylvania, that of gentleman farmer, complete with gun and pointer (neither of which he could control).

Like many second generation immigrants (see “Hansen’s Law” in Sollors 1986: 214-215), West was ambivalent about his religious and cultural identity, sometimes rejecting it outright, and sometimes romanticizing it, for example, by forming an outsider’s art group at Brown University which he dubbed, drawing on his Baltic ancestry, “The Hanseatic League” (Martin 1970: 56). Born Nathan Weinstein, the child of prosperous, educated immigrant parents, West was to some extent encouraged to assimilate into the wider American society; this was the

proven path to social and financial success. Perhaps he did so too thoroughly. According to his friends, West denied that any such thing as a Jew existed, at least on a racial basis (quoted in Martin 1970: 79). Nor was he a conventionally religious man, to put it mildly. Despite his avid demonstrated interest in Judaism and Catholic mysteries, he was frequently cheerfully blasphemous in his references to Judaism and Christianity, in life and in his fiction. Outwardly, West was by and large a secular intellectual, liberal but politically uncommitted.

Among friends, West never denied his Jewishness, but publicly he took pains to construct and maintain a particular authorial persona: that of the Eastern-educated, fashionably bohemian but well-bred American writer, the type that would have fit in nicely in a café scene in *The Sun Also Rises*. This was both a professional choice—he hated being constrained by the label of “Jewish writer”—and quite likely, given his personality, a quixotic one as well.<sup>ix</sup> For instance, the author biography on the back of the original Covici-Friede edition of *A Cool Million* claims that West attended a New England preparatory school and spent two years in Paris (Meade 2010: 163). In reality, West grew up and attended school in the “gilded ghetto”<sup>x</sup> of the then well-to-do, largely Jewish East Harlem, and the Upper West Side, and only spent four months in Paris, loafing and pretending to be an artist.

“The Imposter” ([c. 1933] 1997), a posthumously published short story by West based in part on his Parisian adventures, sheds some light on the author’s conception of role-playing, a subject that would show up frequently in his life and works. “The Imposter” tells the story of Beano Walsh, a young American would-be sculptor in Paris. Both the unnamed narrator and his friend Beano cultivate the persona of the eccentric artist, especially Beano, who takes it too far. After purchasing a perfectly-proportioned corpse from a morgue for his work, Beano is jailed by the uncomprehending gendarmerie. To escape a criminal sentence of murder, Beano plays a part

once again, this time not that of artist, but of lunatic. Unfortunately, Beano is whole-heartedly believed and committed for life, the police officers reasoning that “He’s an insane man who knows he’s insane...Instead of hiding his disease, which would be the obvious thing to do, he hid only part of it, the more serious part, and used the part he exposed to hide the rest” (424). Appropriately, it is never made clear in the story whether or not Beano has actually gone insane. The world thinks he is mad and that is enough to condemn him.

This short story, and the other available biographical information about the young West, suggest the imaginings of a young author who is highly sensitive to the necessity and incredible potential dangers of role-playing in life. His characters’ creation of artistic personae, like West’s creation of his own, served several purposes, not the least of which was to create an ironic detachment between themselves and the world, something many of his modernist contemporaries also did in their fiction. Unfortunately, as the Beano story demonstrates, what might begin as a jest, a harmless affectation, or a self-defense mechanism, can ultimately be detrimental to one’s character, and in the case of Beano, even one’s sanity. Yet despite the dangers of the ironic poseur stance, in West’s case this schizophrenic dual-mindedness could also sometimes be beneficial, enriching his fiction. One critic has commented that West surpassed his slightly older literary peers in possessing a broader view of life than Hemingway, and a capacity for intelligent self-criticism greater than Fitzgerald’s (Podhoretz [1964] 1994: 81)—both qualities consistent with the character of a self-conscious ironist like West. But what happens when dual-mindedness and intelligent self-criticism are pushed to their ironic limits in a work of art, as they are in *Balso*? In West’s case, this yielded very strange fruit indeed.

## II. Ethical Themes in *Balso* I: A Multiple-Pronged Attack

Most scholars agree that the principal theme of *Balso* is that of the exhausted artist in an exhausted culture. It is an absolute rejection of “the artistic, the rational, and the spiritual pretensions of man” (Light 1971: 41). West’s specific object of attack is what he regards as the self-indulgent (modernist) art of his time, then, in ever-widening circles, he broadens his critique to include nothing less than the entire history of Western civilization, and finally, ascending to the rarified air of the realm of moral philosophy, he questions the capacity of art to satisfy the human need for meaning in life. These three assaults by West reflect the work’s three major areas of ethical concern. Most scholars tend to focus on one or two of these areas, at the exclusion of the others. This in itself is not necessarily a problematic critical practice; what is unfortunate is when scholars suggest that one set of ethical concerns essentially cancels out the others, and is alone worth studying. This leads to an unproductive battle between what might be called the “political West” versus the “metaphysical West.” This conflict is evident not just in discussions of *Balso*, but also of West’s oeuvre as a whole, and should be addressed before going further. In a passage summarizing West criticism from the ‘30s to today, a 2006 article explains this battle well:

In the last decade literary criticism has claimed Nathanael West for an explicitly political strain of experimental literature that descends from a Continental ‘avant-garde.’ This avant-garde, political West has been contrasted to the ‘modernist,’ humanist West who dominated the criticism of the postwar years. The earlier, humanist interpretation had viewed the suffering of West’s angst-ridden, sexually frustrated, Dostoevskian heroes, and their withdrawal into private worlds of dream, delusion, or art, as symptomatic of a

vaguely existentialist human condition...But recent readers have sought to relate West's work to consumerism, professionalization, and popular culture...". (J. Greenberg: 591)

Leaving aside for the moment the debate over whether West is a modernist (defined in this instance and throughout this chapter as a writer of the interwar period who "interprets modernity as an experience of loss" [Loeffelholz 2008: 712]), or an enlightened avant-gardist of the same period criticizing the modernists,<sup>xi</sup> this summary indicates that West scholarship to date tends to take one of a few apparently mutually exclusive approaches. This does not have to be. Far from constituting an "escape from politics" (Butler 2000: 15), as some have perhaps reasonably feared, a revitalized ethical criticism can actually be used to traverse this impasse. As Tobin Siebers argues at length in *The Ethics of Criticism*, virtually every contemporary critical school justifies its theoretical choices ethically (1988: 2) (and by "ethically" he means based on human values). Using the example of Foucault's proclaimed "death of man," and the human sciences in *The Order of Things*, Siebers claims that Foucault's turn to the linguistic from the human is based on a particular negative understanding of human nature as being characterized by the desire to oppress others (4). Siebers believes that Foucault's "struggle to eliminate the constitutive subject expresses the ethical wish to end the reign of terror that he associates with history by turning to language as the only ethical subject" (3). Siebers goes on to analyze several other critical schools at length—including some feminist criticism with avowedly political aims—in order to demonstrate that they are all ethically motivated. With ideas like those of Siebers in mind, an ethical criticism that does not automatically exclude overtly political literary critiques, but embraces them as an alternate form of ethical critique will go far in promoting collegiality among practitioners of different critical methods, and most importantly, help create a space for fruitful dialogue between groups previously speaking different languages. Indeed, a

willingness to embrace a pluralism of viewpoints and methodologies is one of the reasons why most ethical criticism today is so ill-deserving of the charge laid against it throughout much of the twentieth century, namely, of being inflexibly and hypocritically moralistic.<sup>xii</sup>

The difference between the “political West” and the “metaphysical West” critical approaches are not those of kind, but of focus, and both have the potential to be enlightening. It is a matter of choice and a matter of perspective. For example, within the necessarily limited scope of this study, my choice has been to purposely confine myself to discovering, as best I can, the “philosophy of life” (Edmundson 2004: 77), or ethics, of this work, a conception, not surprisingly, almost identical to Martha Nussbaum’s definition of the implied author as “the sense of life embodied in the text as a whole” (2001b: 242). By uncovering the central ethical themes of the novel, the image of the implied author also emerges. All three targets for ethical critique highlighted in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* mentioned above make up components of the greater sense of life of this work as a whole.

To return to the task at hand: one of the great difficulties in discussing *Balso Snell*, and in ethical criticism in general, is to provide a comprehensive view of all its simultaneous processes, which means to somehow examine how all three ethical issues connect to the novel’s overall subject: that is, the dilemma of the failed artist. It makes the most sense to begin with the most historically specific and localized, and work our way out toward the most general and esoteric questions. This means to begin with the failure of the modernist artist and the failure of the artist in the Western tradition, successively, and then proceed to the novel’s largest philosophical area of inquiry—the failure of art throughout history to represent human life meaningfully. Furthermore, these first two critiques are the most obvious in the text, and the ones that have been commented upon the most frequently in the past by critics.

It should be noted that West, who is 21 years younger than James Joyce, treats modernist artists as being of a piece with the great Western tradition, not a radical departure from it. His elders' modernist project is treated with the same amount of respect that this group afforded their own immediate progenitors, the Victorians. The modernists strived to produce entirely form-driven art and literature—the “imitation of imitating” (C. Greenberg [1939] 2005: 4), not the imitation of life—because they believed that this method, paradoxically, came closer to conveying the inarticulate confusion of their times than supposedly “realist” works. Over time, the rebels' work became normative. Thus, for younger writers like West, the modernists had graduated to become just another phase in Western civilization. West frequently lumps the two together, and these two targets for criticism overlap significantly.

Of the first two, most of West's harshest criticisms are reserved specifically for the modernist artist, that representative of a corrupted Western culture, and not Western culture itself. Western civilization's rampant consumer culture is criticized in a much more focused way in West's third novel, *A Cool Million*, a reverse Horatio Alger story and the author's only pure satire. In *Balso*, West limits such direct criticisms to his structural gimmick, and a few scattered wise-cracks. Balso's journey takes place in a huge Trojan horse, that most obvious symbol of an imposing Western culture gone rotten on the inside. Balso the American is greeted patronizingly by his first guide as “an ambassador from that ingenious people, the inventors and perfectors of the automatic water-closet, to my people who are the heirs of Greece and Rome” (West [1931] 2006: 6). In another throw-away wisecrack, parodying, perhaps, the social reformers and other cultural nay-sayers, Balso sums up all of Western civilization's ills, blaming them for the precocity of one of the young authors he meets along his journey: “Having no alternative, Balso blamed the war, the invention of printing...the use of contraceptives, the large number of

delicatessen stores, the movies, the tabloids...the decline of the western world, commercialism, and, finally, for throwing the artist back on his own personality, the renaissance” (31). Once again, moments like these, directly attacking Western culture, usually only appear in passing for comic effect. The larger cultural tradition is not West’s major target.

The modernist artist, however, is thoroughly lambasted. The novel spends a great deal of time and effort mocking the pretenses of the artists of his day, and the artists of the past in the European tradition. Throughout the course of the novella, West parodies writers and poets including Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Joyce, Proust, Williams, Pound, Perelman, Hammett, Cabell, Huxley, Lawrence, and many others (Martin 1970: 130). One of innumerable examples is found in the very first words of the novel, the epigraph, which comes from Proust: “After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey.” It is doubtful that Proust conceived of the life-journey ever taking place in the “alimentary canal” of a Trojan horse (West [1931] 2006: 3). The text is so immersed in literary references<sup>xiii</sup>, particularly modernist ones, that pinpointing them every couple of lines might serve as a good identification exercise in a modernist survey course. This is no exaggeration of the matter. In fact, recently, Jane Goldman praised *Balso* as a sort of subversive guide to the canonical texts of high modernism (2004: 1). The proliferation of citations is also one of the many reasons that *Balso* has been criticized in the past. Besides satirizing the modernists, whose use of citation was prodigious—Joyce and Eliot are the two most notable examples—it is also a rather too obvious show of erudition.

West eviscerates the modernist artist with artistic pretensions through his send-up of the character of Mary McGeeney, a starchy and self-important teacher and would-be writer, who turns out to be *Balso*’s old flame. McGeeney’s project is the biography of one “Samuel Perkins,” who she explains to him is the biographer of E.F. Fitzgerald, who is himself the



biographer of D.B. Hobson, who is the biographer of James Boswell, who, of course, authored the *Life of Samuel Johnson*. Miss McGeeney is seemingly unaware that her project is banal and derivative, and is instead pleased to be “another link in a brilliant literary chain” (West [1931] 2006: 33). She assumes that someday someone will write her own biography, as the biographer three times removed from the original individual of genius, and that “ad infinitum, we will all go rattling down the halls of time, each one in his or her turn a tin can on the tail of Doctor Johnson” (33).

This sort of scathing critique of the worst scholarship of West’s day was characteristic of the writer, whose academic career was checkered with failures, to say the least, and who revealed himself as being deeply skeptical, even contemptuous, of academics as he saw it. After a failed term at Tufts University as a freshman, West had transferred to Brown on the strength of a “borrowed” transcript from another student at Tufts of the same name<sup>xiv</sup> (Martin 1970: 52). There he wrote an essay satirizing academic pedantry entitled, “Euripides—A Playwright” (West [1923] 1997) for a Greek drama class (later published in the Brown literary magazine, *Casements*), that he passed off as a serious effort (Martin 1970: 61). “Euripides” is a hodge-podge of ridiculous nonsense, a series of meaningless grand pronouncements and long quotations cobbled together. It concludes portentously with the lines: “In reading Euripides, we find ourselves ready to classify him at moments as a satirist and at other moments as a man of feeling. Of course he was both. Sometimes he seems like a religious man and again like a charlatan. Of course he was neither. He was a great playwright” (396). Based in part on this act of academic tomfoolery, West actually did quite well in the course, a fact that no doubt amused him immensely.

Based on this “Euripides” example, the Mary McGeeney one in *Balso*, and many others, a portrait begins to emerge of a young man thoroughly unimpressed by Western literary culture, from the Greeks to the modernists. These could be viewed as juvenile acts of defiance, and in part they are, but they are also much more. For West was no philistine when it came to arts and culture. He was a voracious reader throughout his life, an autodidact who did most of his studying outside the classroom. In high school he often skipped classes to spend his days reading in the New York Public Library instead (Meade 2010: 29). He did not reject education as such, only education conducted badly, for the wrong reasons. According to some accounts by other members of West’s generation, American education during West’s time looked abroad, and consisted almost entirely of the study and aping of the European masters. What would be known as the New England Renaissance (featuring Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, et. al.), had not yet emerged as a concept with currency in American schools. In short, a vital, native American tradition was still in the process of being invented. The editor and critic Malcolm Cowley, a contemporary of West’s who chronicled the lost generation in his *Exile’s Return* ([1934] 1994), described the experiences of a typical American schoolboy in the book. In words that could have been penned with West himself in mind, Cowley writes:

A Jewish boy from Brooklyn might win a scholarship by virtue of his literary talent. Behind him there would lie whole generations of rabbis versed in the Torah and the Talmud, representatives of the oldest Western culture now surviving. Behind him, too, lay the memories of an exciting childhood: street gangs in Brownsville, chants in a Chassidic synagogue, the struggle of his parents against poverty...Before him lay contact with another great culture, and four years of leisure in which to study, write and form a picture of himself. But what he would write in those four years were Keatsian sonnets

about English abbeys, which he had never seen, and nightingales which he had never heard. (31)

From this perspective, if *Balso* was a rebellion, it was one well-worth the effort. *Balso* can be viewed as a principled rejection of cultural pretension, against the American cultivation of a “foreign” (European) knowledge as merely a symbol of social achievement. The search for an authentic American literature was always an interest of West’s. *Contact*, the literary magazine that he edited briefly before it folded in the early ‘30s, was dedicated to this very task. In *Balso*, West satirizes that which he most despises, and in this respect, despite its vulgarities, the novel represents the author’s moral stand, as well as his aesthetic statement.

In addition to highlighting the academic pedantry of the cultured class, *Balso* also concerns itself with the modernist artist’s disturbing tendency toward solipsism, touching on this theme from almost the very beginning of the novel. In making this specific critique, he echoes the views of many of his peers, who might be called the “late modernists,” those born ten to twenty years after the original generation of Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and company. The critic Edmund Wilson, born some time in between, and a friend of West’s, addressed this issue in his well-known study of symbolism, *Axel’s Castle* ([1931] 1959). The artistic lives of the symbolists, beginning with the French poets in the mid-nineteenth century, and eventually the American moderns like Eliot and Stein, as a general rule, were purposely isolated from the larger society. This was done as defense mechanism, a horrified reaction to bourgeois dominance in an increasingly commercial, rapidly-changing world. The “Axel’s Castle” of the title refers to Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s epic prose poem “Axel,” a Romantic tale of a Germanic prince who gives up love, wealth, and a life of adventure for fear that the reality could never match his imagination, and commits suicide. Wilson uses Axel the contemplative, the “super-dreamer”

(264) as representative of the symbolists, many of whom had given up on all external human experiences—travel, romance, politics—and had retreated into the wholly imaginative world of art and literature instead (265).

Malcolm Cowley also condemned his modernist peers for their narcissistic withdrawal from society, stating that all of them, no matter what specific school they adhered to, shared the same simple principle: “*Art is separate from life; the artist is independent of the world and superior to the lifelings*” ([1934] 1994: 144). In the epilogue to the 1934 edition of *Exile’s Return*, Cowley unfavorably compares the solipsistic ‘20s modernists to those who would become known as the social realists of the ‘30s. Flush with the spirit of the ‘30s, he declares that the inner artistic world “has been enfeebled as a result of its isolation” (332) and exhorts the ‘30s artists to look to the turmoil of their times for inspiration.

And so we see that West was not alone in accusing modernist art of being unhealthily narcissistic. He just did so in a very idiosyncratic way, combining irony, the surreal, and scatological humour. For example, early on in the novel Balso recalls his invention, the “Phoenix Excrementi,” a race of beings who “eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels” (West [1931] 2006: 5). This is a brilliant invention on the part of West, in that it purposely conflates the idea of the transcendent, Phoenix-like artist, with the mundane human process of digestion and excretion. It drags the artistic ideal down to the level of the human animal at its most creaturely. The artist is not the Romantic individual, finding the resources within himself to be splendidly reborn; instead, the artist is portrayed as a morbid introvert, who consumes and excretes himself. This idea is repeated even more emphatically several pages later, when Balso’s first guide proclaims, “Art is not nature, but rather nature digested. Art is a sublime excrement” (8). What is more, in the advertisement

West himself prepared for *Balso*'s publication, he briefly quotes the German modernist painter, Kurt Schwitters: "Tout ce que l'artiste crache, c'est de l'art," translated as "Everything the artist expectorates is art" (quoted in West [1931] 1997: 398).

The curious thing about *Balso*'s promotion copy is that it contains no hint of the heavy-handed ironic humour that drenches the actual text. If one were to judge *Balso* based solely on West's advertising of it, including the Schwitter quote, one might reasonably suppose that the novel was meant to be an extended expression of modernist ideas on art, rather than what it actually is, an extended *criticism* of modernist ideas on art. To understand the idiosyncratic humour of *Balso*, including the not-so-subtle recurring description of art as "nature digested," the influence of Dadaism on the work must be considered. The Dadaist sense of humour is very much like West's own "particular kind of joking" (Podhoretz [1964] 1994: 80), and among all of West's works, it is most evident in *Balso*. West's target in *Balso* is the onanistic artist, and his strategy of attack is through the methods of Dadaism and French surrealism; put somewhat differently, he is performing the curious trick of making a more or less modernist critique of modernist art.

West had long been fascinated by the French literary movements that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. At Brown, he had published a clearly Baudelaire-inspired poem entitled "Rondeau" in the campus literary magazine, *Casements*. ("My ladies eyes appear to be/ Like brimming pools of ecstasy..." [quoted in Martin 1970: 74]). After *Balso* was published, an interviewer claimed that West had been influenced by the two intellectual currents most popular on campus during his time there: Catholic mysticism and French surrealism (Light 1971: 34). West himself clearly indicated as much in the promotion advertisement that he wrote anonymously for *Balso*, stating somewhat pretentiously: "With the French, however, West can

well be compared. In his use of the violently disassociated, the dehumanized marvellous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic, he is much like Guillaume Apollinaire, Jarry, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Raymond Roussel, and certain of the surrealists” ([1931] 1997: 397).

The Dadaist touch—meaning in this instance the deliberate embrace of the irrational as the artist’s appropriate response to an irrational world—is visible in much of *Balso*, in particular the John “Raskolnikov” Gilson episode. Gilson is a schoolboy and an aspiring writer who Balso meets in the course of his travels. In one of Gilson’s manuscripts, reminiscent of Dostoevsky and Poe, he recounts, from the madman’s perspective, a lurid tale of a cultured madman who murders a dishwasher. The Gilson scene elaborates on the “failed artist” theme. Gilson writes: “I can know nothing; I can have nothing; I must devote my whole life to the pursuit of a shadow” (West [1931] 2006: 16). The impossibility of the artist ever accurately translating reality leads to Dadaist madness. Gilson also states: “Now, my imagination is a wild beast that cries always for freedom. I am continually tormented by the desire to indulge some strange thing, perceptible but indistinct, hidden in the swamps of my mind” (16). This tortured individual is finally driven to murder a harmless fool, in a fruitless attempt, as he says, “to regain my balance” (20). He does not succeed in doing so.

Most serious West critics have noted the influence of French surrealism and Dadaism on the author.<sup>xv</sup> The older West critics of the ‘60s and ‘70s, as a rule, tend to claim that although the Dadaist techniques strongly appealed to him as a method of rebelling against a materialist culture, West did not share some of the (read: Leftist) social and political goals of this group (Galloway 1964: 113-114). Critics of the ‘90s and later, on the other hand, tend to believe the opposite (Veitch 1997: 17). The political orientation of West’s works is not this study’s focus. A topic more relevant to this study is the ethical implications of using Dadaist/surrealist

techniques. What were the Dadaists' motives and methods, and to what ends were they used by West? Essentially, the originators of Dada, with whom West seemed to be most familiar, used absurdity and negation in their art, literature, and public demonstrations to express their disgust with the hypocrisies of bourgeois society, which many blamed for the First World War. They called for the complete desanctification of conventional art, which they viewed as being bourgeois in origin (Pierre 1969: 52). In his "Memoirs of Dadaism" (1959), one of the founders, Tristan Tzara, described the Parisian branch's first demonstrations to the public. Representing the spirit of Dadaism, Tzara read aloud from a newspaper article while an electric bell was purposely rung over and over, completely drowning him out (304). When the public protested Dadaism as nihilist and irrational—a descent into madness—the Dadaists were delighted. "We had already said," wrote Tzara, "that the true Dadaists were against Dada" (308). Distrustful of all preceding art movements, the Dadaists did not conceive of themselves as another competing movement, but as an anti-art, an anti-movement.

Dadaism was certainly motivated by the purest of moral aims. It truly came into being with the founding of the Cabaret Voltaire, a nightclub featuring avant-garde artistic acts in 1916. The Cabaret Voltaire was founded by Hugo Ball, the German poet and stage director, and his wife Emmy Hennings. Ball had volunteered for service in the German army at the outbreak of the Great War, but had been turned away because of his weak heart (Steinke 1967: 111). After touring occupied Belgium as a civilian, and experiencing the traumatic death of a dear friend in the war, Ball became a committed pacifist, fleeing to Switzerland, as did so many other European artists, bohemians, and political dissenters during this period. The spoken word poetry, novel readings, dance, songs, and other performances at the Cabaret Voltaire all shared one commonality: they were "designed to be a 'dionysian' protest against the futility of war,

against all traditional art, literature, music and generally, against the senselessness of all things” (Steinke 1967: 164). In this context, the claim of another Dadaist founder, Jean Arp, that “Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of men today with illogical meaninglessness” (1969: 114), makes sense.

If Dadaism’s motivations and aims were pure, its methods, unfortunately, could only half-fulfill them. It was a philosophy of destruction, not construction. Its prerogative was to abolish conventional art, conventional morality—in short, conventional life in its totality. West’s *Balso* shares with Dadaism this prerogative of destruction. West’s novel also shares Dadaism’s weaknesses: its lack of direction, its frivolity, its ultimate inconclusiveness. The objects of their derision deserved the Dadaists’ and West’s scorn, but neither of the two offered any way forward. Artistically, Dadaism has been called “a sort of clearing station: what it took from Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism, it passed on to Surrealism and abstraction” (Pierre 1969: 96). Perhaps it makes the most sense to conceive of West’s Dadaist dabblings in *Balso* similarly as a casualty clearing station: a moment in which temporary aid is administered before the patient is sent off to receive proper medical care. As moral gestures of righteous rebellion, Dadaism and West’s *Balso* share this provisional quality.

### **III. Ethical Themes in *Balso* II: The Voice of Janey Davenport**

One of the reasons why *Balso* is so difficult a text for the ethical critic to analyze is because of its confluence of narrative voices, shifting constantly from the unnamed third person narrator, to the first person perspectives of the would-be artists *Balso* meets along his journey, and back again. Those who search for a representative voice in order to provide some clue to the implied author’s overall ethical perspective, do so in vain. *Balso* is notoriously multivocal. It is



useful to turn to Mikhail Bakhtin at this juncture—a scholar who provides an alternative conception from many on what it means for a work to be rhetorically coherent. In his introduction to Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Wayne Booth, that arch-proponent of a return to author-centric criticism (make that the implied author), admits that Bakhtin’s ideas on the best authors “freeing” their characters from their direct control strongly challenge his own (1984: xxiv). For Bakhtin, Booth explains, fiction is the best conceptual tool for negotiating the “polyphony,” or multiple voices and perspectives that make up human life (xx). The question of whether or not there is authorial control over the voices emanating from a text wanes in significance; instead, the focus becomes what Bakhtin so admires in the best writing of Dostoevsky: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 1984: 6). These voices are allowed free rein for discourse; conflict is expected, even encouraged, because such conflict properly reflects the cacophony of voices sounding in one life, or even within one consciousness. These voices are not the mouthpieces of the content, they actually create content organically, in a sense (43).

Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky for creating heroes who are not representative of some monological authorial worldview, but who are pure voices, representing one independent voice among many in the author’s consciousness. Dostoevsky’s hero is fixed; he or she is a “particular point of view on the world and on oneself” (Bakhtin 1984: 47). A productive way to go about ethical criticism, I would argue, albeit one that Bakhtin himself might not have had in mind in his conceptualization of “polyphony,” is to isolate and analyze individual voices within a text which often go unheard, or are drowned out by louder speakers. By isolating these present, but sometimes muted voices, the critic often reveals overlooked aspects of a work. This approach is particularly useful in this novel, where the sheer number of voices, and the struggle

to find a reliable narrator, often makes it difficult to reach any conclusions about the novel's governing ethics at all. For example, viewed through the eyes of its protagonist Balso, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* sticks to what the novel purports to be on the surface, its first two ethical foci: a satirical examination of modernism and the greater Western tradition's artistic and literary pretensions. Through the perspective of another one of the major characters, one of Balso's attempted conquests, the hunchbacked and hydrocephalic Janey Davenport, other themes move to the forefront. Through Janey's perspective we move to the third major ethical issue of the novel, exploring the theme of art's tragic banalization of human emotion.

Shifting our focus as readers to Janey's voice from Balso's, in order to better understand the larger ethical themes of this novel, makes sense for a number of reasons. Firstly, focussing on Janey is, for many readers no doubt, an intuitive response. As so many dedicated teachers of literature have noticed, readers have a natural tendency of connecting most with the characters whose values they judge positively (Phelan 2007: 1),<sup>xvi</sup> and more generally, with the texts whose moral questions engage them the most intensely (Coles 1989: 190). For this individual reader, at least, for reasons that will be outlined in greater detail below, Janey is a highly sympathetic character for precisely these reasons.

This raises the issue, touched on briefly in the introduction, of reader subjectivity and its place in ethical criticism. Wayne Booth, likely the father of the new ethical criticism, begins *The Company We Keep* by talking about the objections to *Huckleberry Finn* raised by a black colleague at the University of Chicago, Paul Moses. Moses is paraphrased as saying, "The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in class, and I can't get all those liberal white kids to understand why I am angry" (quoted in Booth 1988: 3). At first, Booth was concerned by Moses' apparent lack of objectivity in appraising the novel, but later came to the

conclusion that Moses' personal ethical reading was a wholly legitimate form of criticism (4). Booth's conversations with Moses and others of similar opinion never caused him to lose his regard for the literary quality of *Huckleberry Finn*; however, they did cause him to consider ethical questions about the book that had never occurred to him before. Booth states that his viewpoint changed from "untroubled admiration to restless questioning" (477-478), surely a healthy transition for a conscientious literary critic to make. Similarly, Daniel Schwarz, when discussing the possibility of a new humanistic ethics of reading, asks the rhetorical question: "Do I not have a greater professional and personal stake in some texts than in others?" (2001: 12). He also suggests that there is a difference between an ethics *of* reading and an ethics *while* reading, and that part of the former involves freely admitting our own perspective and biases (12). Critics like Booth and Schwarz believe that complete critical objectivity is impossible, and even undesirable; our values are the products of our unique personal experiences, and can be brought to bear in critical analysis in a way that encourages diverse readings, not prejudiced ones. Furthermore, although modern ethical critics are more free to bring personal values to bear when considering a work, they do so with the understanding that no one reading, including their own, is definitive, but instead a contribution to a larger, open-ended critical discussion.

It is important to emphasize at this juncture that readers need not distrust their emotional connection to a character as something that might undermine their analytical capabilities when considering a work. Part of "surrendering to the text," as previously discussed, is opening oneself up to the possibility of character identification. As Martha Nussbaum definitively demonstrates in her powerful book, *Upheavals of Thought*, our emotions are actually legitimate value judgments (2001b: 19). She identifies three major characteristics of this view of emotions as value judgments: 1.) that emotions are part of a definite cognitive process—an appraisal of

goods; 2.) that they are eudaemonistic (concerned with one's own well-being); and 3.) that emotions center on people and things external to one's self, but necessary for one's own happiness (4). Thus, far from being tumultuous and irrational, our emotions are just the opposite: rational appraisals of the world toward the purpose of our own well-being. Our emotional connection to fictional characters, Nussbaum argues, stems from empathy—a sense of identification with the implied author and their characters—but also from our own imaginative understanding that what happens to these characters could potentially become our own fate in life as well (242). Thus, characters also represent a variety of human possibilities. For Nussbaum, literature is a highly engaging philosophical enterprise. This is because moral issues can be “difficult to assess without the sustained exploration of *particular lives*” (Nussbaum 1990: 139; italics added). Involvement with specific characters, like Janey, helps readers engage more deeply with the ethical content of a novel.

Experiences vary, but Janey Davenport's character has the potential to generate certain strong emotional responses, and along with them, as Nussbaum asserts, moral appraisals. Her appearance in and of itself is enough to trigger a strong reaction; the hydrocephalic Janey is a typical Westian grotesque figure. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this study, West habitually uses physically deformed characters to inspire compassion. For many, the almost instantaneous response to other human beings with severe deformities is pity and a stifled, shameful feeling of “thank goodness it didn't happen to me.” The emotional abuse she suffers as the result of Beagle's offhand irony prompts similarly eudaemonistic feelings. “How dreadful it must be, like Janey, to not have one's feelings taken seriously,” leads directly to the ethical judgement: “It is morally wrong to make light of another person's sorrow, regardless of how closely it appears to correspond to literary or artistic clichés.”

Another reason why it behooves readers to listen more closely to Janey's voice is that it makes sense to do so given the structure of the narrative. The sheer length allotted to the Janey segment is significant. *Balso* is only about 60 pages in length, nearly a third of which is Janey's story, which runs so long that the central plot regarding Balso's journey is almost forgotten by the reader. In fact, Janey's story is the longest of the "failed author" stories. As mentioned, the fabula of *Balso* is his progression through the Trojan horse from failed artist to failed artist. Each one reads excerpts from his or her project, and as they do so, the imaginary worlds that they recount, and the reality of their encounter with Balso blur together. As mentioned, the structural conceit, Balso's journey, is discarded by the time Balso reaches Janey. Her compelling story tends to overshadow the other preceding tales by virtue of its length, its placement, and its content.

Furthermore, Balso's exchanges with the authors in between their recounting of their stories is banal, merely intellectual bantering, whereas some of the failed authors speak with great passion, concerning the most profound human emotions. The contrast between these interludes is noticeable. For example, after the moving Janey episode, the novel returns to Balso, concluding with an asinine final scene, the anti-climactic seduction of Mary McGeeney. For these reasons and more it is perfectly legitimate to pay as much attention to the individual stories-within-the story as one does to the over-arching narrative. Apparently, West would later write that the Janey Davenport interlude, influenced by Spengler and Valéry, was just "an exercise in rhetoric" (quoted in Martin 1970: 84), but because so much of what West publicly stated was disingenuous, this claim cannot be believed. The poignancy of Janey's statements within the story speaks for itself, regardless of the author's intentions.

The tragic quality of the Janey interlude depends largely on the readers' ability to recognize literary conventions. According to Peter Rabinowitz's "rule of configuration" (1987: 118), certain events or statements in a narrative have a predictive value, and guide the reader to an expected outcome. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, Kenneth Burke has also theorized extensively on the logic of form, notably in *Counter-Statement*, in which he states that form is "an arousing and fulfillment of desires" ([1931] 1968: 124). Through experience, readers come to recognize the plot formulas typical of certain genres, and are gratified when their expectations are fulfilled. *Balso* is written as if acknowledging Burke's "conventional form,"<sup>xvii</sup> or Rabinowitz's rules of configuration every step of the way; it winks at the reader in a postmodern way, always acknowledging the designs of its author. For example, Janey's story in *Balso* is blatantly clichéd by design. Its true subject matter, in fact, is how the audience or reader's knowledge of artistic convention trivializes the human feelings actually being conveyed. The section begins with Janey's attempted seduction by Balso. (In one of this novella's innumerable narrative undulations, it is eventually revealed that this entire episode exists only in the imagination of Mary McGeeney, another Balso-love interest, who is writing an epistolary novel—but that is of no immediate relevance.) This is interrupted by Janey launching in to a long tale about the lover-who-did-her-wrong, Beagle Darwin. In convoluted fashion, Janey has Balso read letters written to her by Beagle, in which Beagle describes, in the form of a lengthy narrative, the potential dire outcome should she come to live with him in Paris: he predicts an unplanned pregnancy and Janey's eventual death. Beagle writes: "Well, Janey's death is a joke. A young, unmarried woman on discovering herself to be pregnant commits suicide. A very old and well-known way out of a very old and stale predicament" (West [1931] 2006: 51).

Because Beagle's view of Janey's imagined suicide is mediated through artistic lenses, it loses meaning in and of itself and is relegated to the status of cliché. These ideas have already emerged to some extent in the Gilson episode, but here they are magnified, made even more tragic. Janey's death represents the ultimate expression of the novel's grand recurring theme: the impossibility of art transcending human suffering, and indeed, the complicity of art in exacerbating suffering by making it banal. This theme reappears in West's works in a more articulate fashion—most notably in *The Day of the Locust*, which takes on the film industry—but its first appearance is in *Balso*. The profundity of Janey's suffering emerges through Beagle's long litany of clichés while imagining her death. He cites Werther, “the Cosmic Urge,” “this vale of tears,” “the song is ended,” “the clown is dead” (West [1931] 2006: 50). He also imagines himself waxing eloquent about her death representing human mortality in a crowded café: “A tragedy that is not alone Janey's, but one that is the tragedy of all of us” (54). Beagle's tiresome, derivative musings do Janey the great disservice of making her sufferings ridiculous. They are proof of the sad limitations of human language when it comes to describing tragedy. Drawing on thousands of years of human culture, Beagle's speechifying on Janey's death comes up short.

Before Janey expires (in Beagle's imagination at least), she is given some of the most important and poignant lines in the novel, all elaborations on the “failed art” theme. Through Beagle's letter she is made to say that she realizes that her impending motherhood would only be treated like a joke by Beagle: “But mother for him is always Mammy: a popular Broadway ballad, Mammy, Mammy, my old Kentucky Home, put it all together, it spells Mother (West [1931] 2006: 44-45). This time, commercial art, not “high” art is the culprit, for debasing the idea of “mother.” Beagle, Janey well realizes, like Emma Bovary, has been poisoned by art and

literature. She tells him that he talks like a character in a book and he says, “I not only talk, but think and feel like one. I have spent my life in books; literature has deeply dyed my brain its own color. The literary coloring is a protective one—like the brown of the rabbit or the checks of the quail—making it impossible for me to tell where literature ends and I begin” (47).

Juxtaposing these two quotations elucidates them both. As mentioned, West’s characters, like the author himself, were very often ironic poseurs. The discussion of the use of irony as a protective mask in the passages above is typical of many modernist texts. Irony was one of the many “disruptive techniques” used by modernist writers to question older values and suppositions about the world (Lauter et al. 2006: 840). The modernists relied on irony to purposely create distance between themselves and the object being discussed. This was not because they were cold and lacking in empathy, as the high modernists have been accused of being, but instead because they strongly distrusted the earlier literary generation’s use of “the rhetorical appeal to a shared human nature” (Nicholls 1995: 15), which they believed was at best patronizing, and at worst false. Viewed in this light, Beagle’s imagined mockery of Janey’s pregnancy by referencing a Broadway tune could be explained as reflective of a modernist impulse; in this case, Beagle does battle with the stereotype of the ideal mother, that angel of house and hearth. Unfortunately, in so doing he also causes great pain to Janey, whose pressing troubles cannot be solved by Beagle’s joking references to either “high” or popular culture. The second quotation indicates that Beagle is aware that his ironic tendencies are pathological, the unfortunate result of over-exposure to literature.

Janey’s most poignant lines are a monologue (through the medium of Beagle’s letter) on the potentially debilitating effects of sustained ironic laughter, focused inward. She tells Beagle:



I'm tired of laugh, laugh, laugh. I want to retain some portion of myself unlaughed at. There is something in me that I won't laugh at. I won't. I'll laugh at the outside world all he wants me to, but I won't, I don't want to laugh at my inner world. It's all right for him to say: 'Be hard! Be an intellectual! Don't feel!' But I want to be soft. I want to feel. I don't want to think. I feel blue when I think. I want to keep a hard, outside surface towards the world, and a soft, inner side for him. And I want him to do the same, so that we can be secure in each other's love...I am tired of eternally bearing armor against the world. (West [1931] 2006: 41)

It is not clear whether this passage was meant to be comically overwrought or genuine and sympathetic. One West scholar, Jonathan Raban, points to passages like these in *Balso* as obvious examples of “deadly earnestness” ([1971] 1987: 380) on the part of the author. Raban believes that West's works are essentially studied social performances, littered with tell-tale sentimental/moralizing moments, revealing the author's own real personal insecurities. Whether intentional or not, Janey's character is transcendent, resisting Beagle's ironic laughter, a type of purely Westian laughter that makes its tortured appearance in all of the author's novels. This has been described as a type of laughter that “resists elevation” because it is “never allowed to become a meaningful, self-transcending consciousness; rather, it occasions a switch into self-mockery as if from another's point of view” (Haynes 2007: 343). Interestingly, Janey is the only narrative consciousness, including *Balso* and the nameless universal narrator, who does not mock herself.

To be clear, the Janey interlude is noteworthy not because this arguably un-ironic interval is West's only moment of ethical seriousness in *Balso*—it is not. It stands out in large part because Janey is the novel's only entirely sympathetic character who *also* most clearly and

directly articulates one of the major issues of ethical import in the novel: the transformation and degradation of emotion to cliché. Wayne Booth defines a reliable narrator as one who “speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work” (Booth [1961] 1968: 158). An unreliable narrator is by no means a rhetorical liability in a novel; however, when the reliable narrator and the implied author are operating in concert, it is usually most easy for the reader to infer the norms of the work. Booth also states that reliable narrators frequently “indulge in large amounts of *incidental* irony” (159; italics added). Janey’s tone does not appear to be ironic, but she is nonetheless still the closest thing *Balso* has to a reliable narrator, using Booth’s definition.<sup>xviii</sup>

This conflict between irony and sympathy within one authorial consciousness is characteristic of West’s fiction, as many critics have noted, including *Miss Lonelyhearts* to some extent, although it is only in *Balso* that this problem is allowed to run rampant, nearly destroying the novel’s rhetorical thrust. Norman Podhoretz views *Balso* as a fight between the sentimental and cynical West, one which he feels ends in a draw ([1964] 1994: 82). Jonathan Greenberg devotes an entire article to this conflict, stating that West’s works, in common with those of many other modernists, are characterized by the struggle between sentiment and satire, and that for West, in *The Day of the Locust* at least, this tension is paradoxically resolved by the reemergence of sentiment in the form of the grotesque (2006: 590-591).

The case is different for *Balso*. Taken as a whole, I agree with Podhoretz that it is not really resolved—West is generally regarded as an ironist, but in this work it is more accurate to characterize him as an author who oscillates between the ironic and the sentimental modes. *Balso*’s tone is inconsistent. If we focus only on Janey, however, “sentiment,” also known as human emotion, seems to prevail. Janey’s voice may not be the strongest in this novel, but it is the most engaging. It does not oscillate; it does not succumb to Westian ironic laughter.

Whereas all the other characters, including Balso, are thwarted artists, suffering from the artist's dilemma of banalizing emotion in their attempt to mediate it through their art—Janey is outside the artistic community and not subject to the same intellectual understanding of her own suffering. She is free to view her situation from one perspective only, her own. She is the victim of art's cruelty, not its perpetrator. For all of these reasons, although it cannot be said that Janey's is the undisputed "representative" voice, it is nonetheless the ethical center of this novel. Hers is the most compelling voice, the key to understanding the chief themes of the novel regarding the banalization of human emotion through art.

#### **IV. Resolution of Ethical Questions**

One of the goals of this chapter has been to discover the major ethical questions explored in *Balso* and outline them. This has meant a progression from the implied author's sharp (if surrealistic in method) criticism of the modernist artistic milieu, to a larger criticism of Western culture, to finally, a questioning of the role of art in mediating human experience. These first two issues are important, because they constitute the larger whole—just as an individual's small, everyday actions make up their whole character. That being stated, it is clear that for the ethical critic the third issue at hand is the one of the greatest ultimate significance, because this issue relates to larger philosophical questions about human life. Believing, in the words of Tobin Siebers, that "living and choosing in the human world are the only true subjects of literature" (1988: 13), it is oftentimes the natural focus for such a critic.

Thus far, I have tried to highlight *Balso*'s principal ethical theme. The artist, states the implied author of this novel, is a tragic creature, because he or she has lost the ability to communicate meaningfully to the world. Ironically, in devoting themselves to self-expression,

their studies and readings have caused them to lose their ability to experience their emotions firsthand. All emotions are now mediated through artistic convention, and through a new complication—mass-produced popular culture—and in the process, one way or another, come out hopelessly artificial. Commercial culture has corrupted, and even art, held to a higher standard, has poisoned the human experience that it was supposed to enrich. If this is indeed the principal ethical issue presented in *Balso*, the next critical question is: how does the author resolve it? The idea of escape, not face-to-face combat is suggested in all of West's novels, including *Balso*. This idea is reflected in one of the possible titles Balso invents for the song he sings early in the novel: "Anywhere Out of the World" (West [1931] 2006: 5), itself echoing, as others have noticed, the title and thematic concerns of a Baudelaire poem (Ratner 1971: 103-104). In West's novel, three escapist cures for the artist's dilemma are proposed: madness, suicide, and finally, carnality. None of them, I will argue, prove to be adequate.

The first resolution, madness, is the one offered up most consistently by the author as an answer to the artist's dilemma. This is evident, first of all, in West's use of surrealist and Dadaist techniques for the novel, related styles that pessimistically suggest that the best way to portray reality is to scramble it beyond all recognition. West's characters also frequently consider madness as an escape-route from a tortured consciousness. The structural conceit of the novel—Balso's travels through the intestinal tract of a huge Trojan horse—is of course, fantastically nonsensical, alone a justification for the claim that the entire novel "constitutes a type of artificial madness" (Klug 1987: 20). If its goal is to defy the tradition of art through destructive insanity, it fails to do so because even the rebellion turns out to be yet another literary cliché (20).

The most obvious example of the attempted escape into madness is that of one of *Balso's* many thwarted litterateurs, the naughty schoolboy, John "Raskolnikov" Gilson. In a pamphlet Gilson sells to Balso for a dollar he outlines his artistic position. In it, Gilson metaphorically describes his character's emotional distress as "the materials of life" rubbing against him (West [1931] 2006: 28). He moans, "If I could only turn irritation into pain; could push the whole thing into insanity and so escape" (28). But the Gilson episode ends without this ever happening. He cannot will himself into madness. The mocking lucid consciousness is still there even after he beats his girlfriend and commits murder.

The next proposed resolution to the artistic dilemma is suicide. This is Janey's way out. Tragically, even Janey's suicide is without dignity or meaning. After her imagined suicide, Beagle then imagines, in great detail, playing the part of the bereaved lover in a Paris café. Speaking to the assembled café-goers, using the recently deceased Janey as his representative figure, Beagle launches into a melodramatic monologue on the tragedy of mortal life: that being the dreadful squalid banality of all human existence. He concludes by crying, "Yet, ah yet, are you expected to compete with Christ whose father is God, with Dionysius whose father is God; you who were Janey Davenport, or one conceived in an offhand manner on a rainy afternoon" (West [1931] 2006: 56). And so even Janey's sacrifice is degraded; her suicide has not solved the artist's dilemma, because it too is clichéd and made ridiculous.

Finally, sex is the third way out proposed by the novel, or perhaps more accurately, sensual hedonism. The schoolboy, Gilson, claims that "All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female" (West [1931] 2006: 26), and the book ends with a sex scene. In it, Balso finally succeeds in seducing his old sweetheart, Mary McGeeney. Balso's monologue preceding the copulation scene, and the narrator's during and after it, are meant to parody

various romantic conventions. The sex scene is described in the most ridiculous, rather Joycean terms: “The miracle was made manifest. The Two became One. The One that is all things and yet no one of them...the mystic doctrine, the purification, the syllable ‘Om,’ the path, the master, the witness, the receptacle, the Spirit of Public School 186, the last ferry that leaves for Weehawken at seven” (61). The book concludes, curiously anticlimactically, with Balso’s orgasm, described as an army retreating slowly, “victorious, relieved” (62). The ending seems disconnected from the rest of the novel. The book ends on a trivial note, without answering any of the important questions that it raised earlier in the preceding Janey scene.

There would seem to be two interrelated ethical questions posed by this novel, one directed at the artist, and the other at the individual (artist or otherwise). The first is the following: how does the artist represent reality without degrading it in the process? The second question, as voiced most poignantly by Janey’s character, asks how one communicates meaningfully in a world where all utterances are public performances mediated through a banalizing and trivializing popular art and culture. Three possible answers to both questions are provided by the implied author provisionally, but none are adequate.

The sensitive artist for whom West is the spokesperson and satirist in this novel, is faced with a dilemma. It is eloquently presented by Edmund Wilson in *Axel’s Castle*, which, not surprisingly, was published in 1931, the same year as *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Wilson’s sedate, scholarly study of the symbolists is very different from West’s surrealist fantasy, but they do ask similar questions about the society in which they live. For Wilson, the only two possible courses of action for the dissenting artist in the bourgeois society of the ‘20s were to either isolate themselves from it entirely, by turning to the inner life, like Axel in his castle (the choice of Proust, Eliot and many other modernists, according to Wilson), or to escape from it like

Rimbaud, that restless spirit who fled Europe for countries without modern democracy or industry (287). For West, the artist's dilemma was somewhat different, although it was still exacerbated by modern commercial culture. For him it could be resolved only through escapist means as well: madness, suicide, or carnality. The major difference between their responses was that Wilson acknowledged that his two escapes were no longer possible, or desirable, that the rebellions of the symbolists had run their course, and that new paths had to be trod (292-293). Presciently, Wilson suggests in 1931 that "we may live to see Valéry, Eliot and Proust displaced and treated with as much intolerance as those writers—Wells, France and Shaw—whom they have themselves displaced," and that symbolism and naturalism would eventually combine into one literary form (294).

West, on the other hand, does not offer any constructive solutions to the problem, not even vague ones, nor does he do what many authors do when asking difficult questions—register a principled ambivalence, allowing their readers to make the final ethical decision. His chosen resolution is a non-resolution: all of his characters embrace madness, suicide, or in Balso's case, a hedonistic release that is entirely unrelated to their earlier quests to find meaning in modern art and literature. Without a proper resolution, the work feels even more disjointed than it did before. It is more like a series of unrelated vignettes than a rhetorically coherent work. Many readers might respond to the text the same way that Balso responded to Gilson after reading his manuscript, by asking, "Interesting psychologically, but is it art?" (West [1931] 2006: 23).

The stated goal at the beginning of this chapter was to isolate this novel's principal ethical themes and how it resolves them. In so doing, I also hoped to discover whether or not my initial negative impression of the text would change. Carrying out the first goal, which is the greater part of ethical criticism, should be methodical and reasonably objective. Responsible

close readings, combined with historical and biographical study are still valuable in shedding light on most texts, even if they will never help us arrive at the mythical “authoritative reading.” The second aim, the evaluative one, or how one personally responds to the author’s selection, presentation and resolution of certain ethical questions, is more of an individualized task. Here the literary scholar should proceed carefully. As many critics interested in ethics have stated, good books are not didactic; they should not dictate one set of values that all good readers will ascribe to. At their best, they should be a “careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of values” (Gardner [1979] 2000: 19). Ethical criticism should do the same thing, recognizing the work of fiction as an object of moral contemplation that can and should be ethically disruptive, challenging the readers’ established views of the world and their place in it. In addition, we must also recognize that ethical debates on texts must always be open-ended. While it should be possible—if the work is sound rhetorically—to identify what moral questions the author asks, and how they respond to them, it is ultimately up to the individual reader to decide whether or not they are willing to accept or reject the implied author’s worldview. It is appropriate for critics to sometimes bring their personal values to bear when discussing a text as long as they understand that they are only contributing to a debate, not providing a single definitive reading, and as long as doing so does not overshadow their primary task: the business of uncovering the ethics of a work.

According to Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep*, who compares reading books to receiving invitations of friendship, the fundamental question relevant to the ethics of narration is the following: “Is the pattern of life that this would-be friend offers one that friends might well pursue together?” (1988: 222), or formulated somewhat differently, are the “patterns of desire” (a Burkean-derived concept, as mentioned above) offered by the implied author ones that I



would choose to accept for myself (272)? In the case of West's *Balso*, the answers to these questions have turned out to be more complicated than I at first thought. After wrestling with a text that I initially found repugnant, my conclusion is that *Balso*, despite its vulgarities, its lack of cohesion, and its sophomoric sense of humour, is actually a deeply humane exploration of how modernist art and literature inadvertently trivializes human emotion. West dramatizes this belief primarily through Balso's interactions with the series of frustrated artists and writers he meets in the Trojan horse, culminating with Janey Davenport, who is, significantly, not an artist of any type, but an artist's muse. The book's artists are too morbidly conscious of how their behavior, and that of others around them, conforms to artistic conventions. Cursed with this hyper-awareness, life seems like a masquerade, and all one's actions become merely calculated artistic poses. *Balso* communicates these themes very well. And so I agree with West's best biographer, Jay Martin, when he suggests that *Balso* represented the author's first tentative step toward expressing "moral indignation without righteousness" (1970: 127) to fit modern tastes that abhorred the exhortatory style of realist Victorian literature.

West the implied author takes a definite moral stand in *Balso*, and his concerns are vital and important. However, I simply cannot accept for myself his resolutions of these concerns: through madness, death or carnality. In Booth's terms, as a would-be companion *Balso* does a fine job as a righteous critic, but for this reader at least, that is not enough. The ideal friend would also offer a scintilla of hope. *Balso*'s worldview is too pessimistic, almost nihilist, something that West's works have been accused of being many times. A member of his literary group of friends, Robert Coates, once said that "...the key to his character was his immense, sorrowful, sympathetic but all pervasive pessimism. He was about the most thoroughly pessimistic person I have ever known" (quoted in Light 1971: 128). This quality shows up in all

of West's fiction, especially *Balso*, a work which chooses to handle its ethical concerns by escaping from them. His is a typically Dadaist response—"to combat insanity with greater insanity" (Steinke 1967: 164). For many readers, perhaps, this is a valid choice. It is certainly an understandable one. However, for others this ethical decision can be viewed as irresponsible and even reprehensible. For these reasons, as an ethical critic my ultimate, personal appraisal of *Balso* is that it is a brave gesture, but nothing more substantial than that.

Another related goal of this critical experiment was to discover whether or not ethical criticism (my brand, at least), could help a reader overcome their initial aversion to a text. The answer in this case is a resounding Yes. Although I still find *Balso* to be a somewhat juvenile minor work, I no longer think that it only says, in the words of West's mother, "Stink, stink, stink." By purposely isolating my project to an attempted elucidation of its ethical questions, I have not been unduly distracted by any of its other, more glaring stylistic elements or motifs. I have discovered that *Balso*'s ethical themes are actually much more complex and humane than I originally thought, and I have developed a newfound respect for the work. Some degree of clarity has been achieved in my understanding of this fantastical, Dadaist-influenced dream narrative. Can this strategy be applied to other works with the same results? While some works would grow in our estimation if we focused on those two simple questions—what ethical problems does this work explore, and how does it "resolve" them?—others would be greatly diminished. For the purpose of clarification and focused analysis, however, this approach has great value to the literary critic.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Judith Fetterley's sense of the term is not meant in this case. In *The Resisting Reader*, Fetterley commissions the feminist critic to become "a resisting rather than an assenting reader" (1978: xxii), meaning a highly critical one, sensitive to the androcentric values and presuppositions woven into some works. Though supportive of the feminist project of revising and widening the American canon, my approach to criticism, as discussed above, is very different from Fetterley's.

<sup>ii</sup>There is certainly a link between Lewis's concept of unliterary "using" versus the more enlightened literary "receiving" and the Aristotelian idea (2004a: 11-12) of the superiority of things that are good in-of-themselves compared to those that are only good insofar as they are useful to get other things.

<sup>iii</sup>In a sense, the evaluative process is also instantaneous and ongoing. Hermeneutics is purposely described very mechanically here to emphasize the necessity of the fully engaged human reader in ethical criticism. As per Gadamer:

...a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. ([1960] 1975: 238).

<sup>iv</sup>Wayne C. Booth explicitly claimed that ethical criticism, responsibly conducted, could indeed generate knowledge (2001b: 16). This idea was central to his career project of revivifying rhetoric in the humanities.

<sup>v</sup>Bloom (2005) sticks close to the critical consensus on *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* in the introduction of *Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts* in his series, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. His views of West's other works tend to be more unorthodox. For example, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is still a masterpiece, but interestingly, it is also an "involuntary instance of...Jewish Gnosticism" (vii). *The Day of the Locust*, West's best-known work, is for him, overpraised, while the little-regarded *A Cool Million* is under-praised (1).

<sup>vi</sup>West scholars of this period who are of this general opinion most notably include his chief biographer Jay Martin (1970), James Light (1971), and Randall Reid (1967). For more on the idea of *Balso* as a pre-text to West's later works, see David Galloway's (1964) essay, "A Picaresque Apprenticeship: Nathanael West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and *A Cool Million*."

<sup>vii</sup>My term, the "ironic poseur," is conceived very much in line with Erving Goffman's ideas on self-presentation, which he likened to a theatre performance. All human beings engage in social "performance," which Goffman defined as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (1959: 15). It

is often in all of the participants' best interests to go along with the performance, and more often than not the performers are to some extent sincere, meaning that they believe, at the very least, in the necessity of their performance. According to Goffman, it is not atypical for some performers to shift back and forth between the two poles of absolute sincerity and absolute cynicism, alternately believing and disbelieving in their social performances (1959: 21). This describes West well, the social performer par excellence.

<sup>viii</sup>West's friends were usually amused by his sartorial tastes, although he was occasionally criticized for being a dandy. Precipitating what would become a life-long rift, West's then-friend John Sanford (née Julian Shapiro) once said to him, "What you are, Pep [his ironic nickname] is a sheeny in Brooks clothing" (quoted in Meade 2010: 126).

<sup>ix</sup>Erving Goffman also writes that the performer's public mask "represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be" (1959: 19). From this perspective, West's authorial presentation of self is not wholly disingenuous.

<sup>x</sup>This was John Sanford's expression (quoted in Martin 1970: 23).

<sup>xi</sup>The terms "modernist" and "avant-garde," as applied to this period, are famously slippery. For some they are synonymous, and for others, especially those who identify "modernist" with the much-maligned "high modernists," they indicate two separate groups. According to Andreas Huyssen and other likeminded scholars, modernism attempted to maintain its "purity and autonomy" from the surrounding bourgeois society it despised by "avoiding any contamination with mass culture" (1986: 54). The avant-garde movements, on the other hand (Huyssen's representative examples include futurism, expressionism, and German Dadaism, among others), rejected the idea that high art should be divorced from popular culture (viii). Other scholars of modernism, such as Lawrence Rainey, strongly question the idea that modernism can be characterized chiefly as a reactionary, anti-mass culture movement, and instead hold a more nuanced view of modernism's complicated relationship with commercial culture (1998: 2-3).

<sup>xii</sup>See Wayne C. Booth's *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (1979), still the best available text on pluralism.

<sup>xiii</sup>As Franco Moretti (1996) has noted in *Modern Epic*, one of the characteristics of the modernist canonical works like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* is its encyclopaedic nature. These works' use of a veritable "bricolage" of cultural and scholarly references is not entirely successful, meaning unified. However, as Moretti writes: "...this is not a *limit* of collage and of *The Waste Land*: rather, it is the specific form of their effectiveness. It is the allegory of a heterogeneous—but forcibly unified—reality. The most abstract form of 'totality' imaginable in the capitalist world-system. And, perhaps, the most truthful" (229). This encyclopedic modernist quality is also certainly evident in *Balzo*, although its application is much more superficial, and its end-product is slight.

<sup>xiv</sup>That name was Nathan Weinstein, West's original name. West legally changed his name in 1926, later telling William Carlos Williams in jest that he chose the new name based on Horace Greeley's advice to "Go West, young man" (Martin 1970: 78-79).

<sup>xv</sup>However, their discussion of this topic is usually fairly cursory. For a more sustained discussion on *Balso* as Dadaist masterwork, see Deborah Wyrick's (1986) "Dadaist Collage Structure and Nathanael West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*."

<sup>xvi</sup>Phelan goes on to explain in *Experiencing Fiction* (2007) how the reader's perception of the narrators' values (including those of the narrative's characters and the implied author) affect one's overall judgment of the novel.

<sup>xvii</sup>Burke identifies five aspects of form in *Counter-Statement*, one of which is "conventional form" ([1931] 1968: 126), in reference to the appeal of the recognition of genre. Also of special relevance to *Balso* is Burke's "syllogistic progression" sub-division of "progressive form," essentially defined as the appeal of the systematically unfolding plot, in which each situation builds on the preceding one (124).

<sup>xviii</sup>She also qualifies, at least at moments in her speech, as what James Phelan calls a "mask narrator." Mask narration is character narration "in which the character narrator is not only a reliable spokesperson for the implied author but also serves as an effective means for conveying the implied author's views along the axes of perception/understanding or of ethics/evaluation" (Phelan 2005: 216).

## Chapter Two

### The Redemptive Value of *Miss Lonelyhearts*

“Kindness is a form of suicide in a world based on the law of competition.”

—Michael Gold, *Jews without Money*

“All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while [sic].”

—Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*

“Your attempt was always subject to reservations, remember; you were not aiming at the impossible. At what, then? Simply at making the attempt itself. In this you succeeded; and with that, the object of your existence is attained.”

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Since its publication in 1933, the most common question asked by critics about *Miss Lonelyhearts* has been whether this dark novel offers an ameliorative vision of the world, or if it is, as it more obviously seems to be, simply a “profound expression of despair” (Volpe [1961] 1971: 92). Variations of this question have been asked by the first humanist wave of West critics in the 1960s to 1980s, who generally analyzed it as a universalist exploration of human suffering and the problem of evil. The second major wave of West critics from the 1990s to today, including Rita Barnard (1995), Jonathan Veitch (1997), Thomas Strychacz (1993) and others, have shifted away from viewing the novel as exploration of theodicy. They have repoliticized West, presenting him as an avant-garde artist who articulated his disdain for American capitalism and consumer culture through appropriation and parody of its popular forms. In their own ways, these scholars have also attempted to answer the question of whether West offers even a sliver of hope for human culture in the twentieth century and beyond. Barnard for instance, discussing

*Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* simultaneously (as critics are wont to do), queries, from a Marxist perspective, “...could one discover, in West’s very negativity, his peculiarly bleak case of *Kultur-pessimismus*, a positive moment? Could one see in his refusal to offer a vision of ‘cultural health’ an insistence on a revolutionary solution?” (1994: 343).

Her answer is a very qualified Yes, but her extreme tentativeness is indicative of the complicated nature of this debate. As many have noticed, “West’s pessimism is an absolute true finding” (Herbst [1961] 1971: 14), and finding a ray of sunshine in this unremittingly bleak novel is a near impossible task. The author’s vision of Western culture is as negative as *The Waste Land*’s, and likewise, the issues it raises are just as relevant and compelling today. West’s writing on the cultural decay of America begs the larger question looming over this specific work, and his entire oeuvre in general: is redemption—cultural or personal—possible? The answer is essential to a deeper comprehension of his fiction. If West’s “moral satire,” (quoted in Martin 1970: 152), as he called it, is in the accusatory vein only, the work can be best viewed as a cutting literary social critique of Depression-era American culture. On the other hand, if some sort of a redemptive reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is possible, our understanding of the novel and novelist changes significantly. Such a reading would save it from the usual charge of nihilism, making the sufferings of *Miss Lonelyhearts*’ correspondents, and the other embattled denizens of his dark universe meaningful.

The precise meaning of “redemptive” in this case is important. The Oxford English Dictionary offers eight different definitions of the word “redemption.” The first and oldest (14th century) comes from Christian theology. It is “deliverance from sin and damnation, especially by the atonement of Christ; salvation.” Most of the other definitions use words like saving, freeing, releasing, and delivering, all of which suggest a final hopeful outcome to an intolerable

situation. According to Leon Morris's still definitive linguistic study of Biblical terms, redemption means more than scholars' typical broad understanding of the word as simply deliverance (1956: 58). Researching its etymology and usage in the New Testament and the Old, and among Rabbinic and secular writers, Morris provides substantive proof that the word actually has two major connotations: the first means to "loosen" or set free; the second means payment for loosening (9). As a whole, Morris believes that the basic Biblical meaning of redemption is "the paying of a ransom price to secure a liberation" (26). According to Christian theology, humanity is saved (or delivered or "loosened") from its own sinful nature through the heavy price—physical, emotional, and spiritual, not financial—of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To date West has been viewed as a minor American late-modernist with a postmodern sixth sense when it comes to understanding the modern mass media-consumer culture world.<sup>i</sup> He certainly is all of these things, but what few have commented on explicitly in recent years are the profound ethical implications of his works. In this chapter I will argue that the author's literary world offers no redemption within its pages, but that there is still significant redemptive value in his work. This thesis differs from previous critical views of West. As I will discuss, the vast majority of older West scholarly work, regardless of its overall appraisal of the writer, places him within the "negative tradition" of modernism. From this viewpoint, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is primarily an anguished heart's cry over a corrupted society. According to more contemporary critics, West's art often has expressive vigour as an avant-gardist's parody of the excesses of mass culture, but is still mainly negative. Either way, the primary function of West's work is seen as critical. The few critics, like Barnard, who have found any positive meaning in West, no



matter how slight, acknowledge that it is rare and marginal, and often struggle to find grounds for even these cautious arguments.

In contrast to earlier perspectives, I will differentiate between redemptive interpretations and redemptive value. The former response argues (in my view, incorrectly), that West portrays a world that conceivably can be saved, and indeed, that is worth being saved, in a moral, not a physical sense. The second response argues that while there is nothing in the text to suggest such a positive reading, it still has an ethical function, directing the reader to contemplate the inherent nobility of the lost cause, the idea that some types of human struggles are meaningful in and of themselves, even if they are doomed to failure. This view corresponds with both the broad meaning of redemption as deliverance, and the more nuanced meaning of the word provided by Morris: a *dearly-bought* deliverance. If West's work has any redemptive value, which I believe it does, it lies largely outside the text, in the reader's moral contemplation of the work. West's novel is nearly nihilist—it does not believe there is meaning to be found in life—but a sense of human dignity can be found somehow in his protagonist Miss Lonelyhearts' ultimately fruitless attempt to find meaning within the narrative. In perceiving this, the reader, not the text, is redeemed.

A few words on method before proceeding: it is my belief that many contemporary readings of West suffer from the same problem: an inattention to the explicit ethical content. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that West's writing, almost self-evidently, begs for its ethical questions to be considered; this is its very *raison d'être*. West's works, as he himself stated on several occasions, were intended to be moral allegories. As his close friend Josephine Herbst believed, "The novels are dark parables embodying West's vision of what it means to be a human being in this world" ([1961] 1971: 13). A parable is, by

definition, a brief story meant to illustrate a moral or religious value. Besides its content, West's intentional lack of descriptive detail, complex characterization, and brevity —*Miss Lonelyhearts*, for instance, is under 60 pages—also points to his narratives' parable-like quality.<sup>ii</sup> The titles of many of his brief chapters also suggest a series of self-contained mini-parables: for example, the Bunyanesque “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp,” “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man,” “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan,” and others.

This is not to say that thoughtful, insightful critics like Rita Barnard do not have ethical commitments. They absolutely do. In Barnard's case, however, the perspective is political and social, and her personal “god terms,” in the words of Richard Weaver (roughly defined as terms particular to an era that are charged with great rhetorical potency [(1953) 1985: 212]), are not “values” and “ethics,” but “mass culture,” “consumer society,” “commodification,” and the like. In Tobin Siebers' *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988), the author explores how “a particular theory or school of literary criticism has justified in an ethical way its theoretical choices” (2), arguing, ultimately, that virtually all modern criticism is motivated by concerns that are, at their roots, ethical ones. The fact that so many critics in recent years have shied away from explicit ethical criticism—even when the text, like *Miss Lonelyhearts*, seems to call for it—is unremarkable given the intellectual climate in which we still labour. Discussing the term “ethics” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham (1995) explains that most of the schools of the theoretical era (which he lists as lasting from circa 1968 to 1987, but which, obviously, still influences contemporary criticism), including deconstruction, feminism and Marxism, among others, “took as their founding premise the radical inadequacy of such Enlightenment leftovers as ‘the universal subject,’ the ‘subject of humanism,’ [etc.]...and in the assessment of the various crimes and misdemeanors committed by or on behalf of this subject, ethics was seen to be

heavily implicated” (387). Many of these theoretical schools objected to the supposed “universal subject” claiming an ethical imperative that was in fact a disguise for his or her (usually his) own personal preferences. At heart, it was not the idea of ethics that these literary schools objected to—in fact, as previously cited, Tobin Siebers (1988) has shown how virtually all critical schools of the late twentieth century have pursued ethical mandates under other names—it was the misuse of ethical claims to justify the subordination of minority views. Somehow, paradoxically, the cry for ethics became associated with political and other forms of oppression.

Today such views still exist, although the wave seems to have crested. Harpham goes on in his chapter to discuss the resurgence of the ethical in literary criticism. The convenient date he selects as the moment of change in the intellectual climate is December 1, 1987, when the *New York Times* reported on Paul De Man’s controversial wartime writing for a Belgian Nazi-collaborationist newspaper (Harpham 1995: 389). Suddenly, the dangers of a wholly linguistic criticism too far removed from human realities and ethical considerations became, once again, apparent. The return of the ethical over the past couple decades has been noted by many, notably Lawrence Buell in his introduction to the 1999 *PMLA* special issue on ethics and literary study, who begins by stating, “Ethics has gained new resonance in literary studies during the past dozen years, even if it has not—at least yet—become the paradigm-defining concept that textuality was for the 1970s and historicism for the 1980s” (7).

Notably, in response to the mistakes of the past, the new ethical criticism tends to be descriptive, not prescriptive, and rejects “doctrinaire” readings of texts (Davis and Womack 2001: x). What it does take as a given across the board is that most works, intentionally or unintentionally, illustrate certain ethical questions that can be examined and discussed by readers in an intellectually productive way. The goal of ethical criticism should never be to impose

one's own values on others, but to produce a rhetorically defensible reading of the text based on its ethical concerns. Readings are expected to vary, of course, and vigorous debate is the lifeblood of all legitimate ethical criticism. My approach is also inspired by Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, both of whom have recognized the potential usefulness of philosophy to elucidate literature, and vice-versa, literature's unique ability to dramatize abstract ethical concepts. As per Nussbaum, ethical understanding, "finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical—and that if we wish to take it seriously we must broaden our conception of moral philosophy in order to include these texts inside it" (1990: ix).

This chapter begins by surveying and critically commenting on the field of *Miss Lonelyhearts* scholarship since the novel's publication, the vast majority of which is in the negative vein, presenting the work as an American Jeremiad. In the second section, with constant reference to the text, I explore how the negative school of West studies, in various ways, nonetheless consistently hints at an *implied redemption* in the work, for example those who have commented on West's use of the grotesque as inspiring compassion. Finally, in the third and fourth sections, inspired by Nussbaum and Rorty's views on the usefulness of literature in illustrating philosophical principles, I use two very different twentieth century philosophical sources to shed light on the novel's themes and redemptive implications. The first is Jacques Ellul's resistance/educational project on the nature of the technological society, and the existential loneliness it engenders. The second is Richard Rorty on a new basis for human solidarity through a shared understanding of suffering. Conceiving of the novel in part as an impetus to ethical reflection, and given West's real ethical concerns, I feel that it is appropriate to use thematically related, if non-traditional philosophical sources when studying it (combined

with critical sources and most importantly, the text itself). This analytical strategy is redeployed in the fourth chapter of this study, using philosophers and cultural theorists including Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin in order to better understand the ethics of *The Day of the Locust*. The rationale behind using philosophical, rather than purely literary sources in order to examine this author is in part to redress the prevailing state of affairs in West scholarship of late: that a writer so obviously obsessed by questions of good and evil, redemption and damnation, should not be studied along these matrices.

### **I. No Redeemer, No Promised Land**

The second and most critically acclaimed of West's novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is a brief, savage and surrealist story of an advice columnist in 1930s New York who becomes spiritually afflicted and mentally unhinged by the sufferings of his own correspondents. Known only as "Miss Lonelyhearts," the newspaperman protagonist is also persecuted by the sadistic taunting of his editor, Shrike, a central figure in the book, who delivers some of its best monologues.<sup>iii</sup> These main characters' names undoubtedly have allegorical significance. As is common in allegory and fable--the most obvious example might be Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, peopled by characters with names like "Old Honest," "Mrs. Know-Nothing," and "Giant Slay-Good,"--West may have been type-naming his main characters. "Shrike" sounds like the "shriek" of a bird of prey, an appropriate name for a Satanic mocker. "Miss Lonelyhearts," a name that can be interpreted every bit as literally as those of Bunyan's characters, references someone who is all too aware of the sad and solitary state of suffering human beings in the world. "Hearts" may be a synecdoche for individuals, isolating the precise organ, associated with love and empathy, upon which the main character fixates when contemplating the human condition.

West was writing during a unique period of change and major expansion in the media industry, comparable to our own internet revolution today, albeit on a much smaller scale. Local newspapers had existed in North America from its colonial period, but never before had they been produced on such a massive scale as in the 1920s and '30s, during West's adulthood. In the 1920s the ratio of newspapers printed daily per individual was approximately one to three (Kyvig 2002: 190). The mass media was beginning to emerge as a shaper of public opinion, and the idea of appealing to an anonymous stranger, a columnist, for personal advice was no longer an absurd one. Many papers had their very own "Miss Lonelyhearts," or agony aunt columns, which were very popular.<sup>iv</sup>

The centerpiece of the novel, and the chief formal element that identifies it as a modernist work, are the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives, transcribed in all their poignant, ungrammatical glory.<sup>v</sup> These pathetic, illiterate missives are from correspondents suffering from a variety of problems: several are abused by their husbands; one is the concerned brother of a mentally handicapped 13 year old rape victim. Another is a distraught teenage girl, born without a nose, who writes: "What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate...I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins" (West [1933] 2009: 2-3). Interestingly, these letters had real-life counterparts in the thousands of documented letters that the Roosevelts received during the Depression, which is also the historical context within which *Miss Lonelyhearts* was written. According to historian Lawrence Levine, the letters to the Roosevelts commonly registered their writers' shame, an internalization of responsibility for their condition, as well as a lingering, embattled sense of dignity, despite it all (1993: 215). The abused wife, "Broad Shoulders," who asks Miss Lonelyhearts, rhetorically, "Every woman is intitiled [sic] to a home isnt she?" (West

[1933] 2009: 43) is similar to the anonymous real impoverished woman from Aurelia, Iowa, who begs Mrs. Roosevelt for her second-hand clothes but pleads, “regardless of what you do please do not put my name and letter up for people to laugh at” (quoted in Levine 1993: 215).

The pathos of these Depression era letters is what eventually drives Miss Lonelyhearts to what is either madness or sainthood. West offers his own explanation of the letters’ significance, as well as a fair synopsis of the book itself within the confines of its pages, in a poorly integrated piece of exposition that is, however, very useful to the reader. In it Miss Lonelyhearts explains to his longsuffering girlfriend Betty why his job is so demoralizing:

A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he’s tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and no longer its perpetrator. (West [1933] 2009: 32)

Assaulted by human suffering on all sides, especially from the casually brutal letters, the ultra-sensitive Miss Lonelyhearts searches for an answer, or failing that, a way out of the mental prison of being conscious of the pain surrounding him. This is a continuation of the “escape” theme in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, one that has preoccupied many other members of the Lost Generation, who felt entrapped by the commercial society in which they lived (Cowley [1934] 1994: 236). When sexual conquests and the consolations of nature fail to satisfy or

adequately distract him, he turns to the self-sacrificial Christian love of Dostoevsky, but that appears to lead only to hysteria: “Christ was the answer,” thinks Miss Lonelyhearts, “but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business” (West [1933] 2009: 3). By the end of the novel, through a tragic misunderstanding, Miss Lonelyhearts is shot by the cripple Peter Doyle, that representative member of a suffering humanity, a “Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the flesh” (Jackson 1971: 5), whom he had intended “to succor...with love” (West [1933] 2009: 58). It is not clear whether he lives or dies, or what is to become of Betty, his pregnant girlfriend. The ending is made even more ambivalent by the fact that in the last chapter Miss Lonelyhearts has a “Religious Experience” (West [1933] 2009: 56), and has either achieved a mystical union with God, or has surrendered, at long last, to the full-blown madness that threatens him throughout the novel.<sup>vi</sup>

Critics of the day, popular as well as scholarly, in general responded reasonably well to the novel, although unfortunately for West, any sales momentum generated by early good reviews was lost when his publisher, Liveright, went bankrupt and most of the first copies were held in limbo until a new publisher took over (Meade 2010: 143-144). The novel was recognized by critics then as “...brilliantly executed, so that one is constantly forced to admire the technique of its torture of one’s nerves” (quoted in Martin 1970: 191). West’s peer, Robert Cantwell, summed up the backhanded compliments of many of the reviews by referring to another one: “William Troy in *The Nation*...said, in effect, that while *Miss Lonelyhearts* was one of the most original of recent novels, he wasn’t very enthusiastic about it...” ([1933] 1994: 56).

Despite such appraisals, over time *Miss Lonelyhearts* was recognized by many as a classic of the era, particularly during the first major critical revival of West’s works from the 1960s up to the ‘80s. Leslie Fiedler commented on it at some length in *Love and Death in the*



*American Novel*, and it is probably on the strength of this novel that he states that West is “the chief neglected talent of the age” ([1960] 1992: 485). West’s chief biographers of the period are unanimous in their praise of the novel as the best of his four published works. James Light writes that the book achieves a “fusion of form and content” superior to his other novels (1971: 88). Stanley Hyman claims that it is among the three finest American novels of the twentieth century (along with *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*) (1962: 27-28). Harold Bloom (1994) has long proven to be one of the novel’s best-known proponents, in favour of its inclusion in the American canon. In the introduction to his collection of *Miss Lonelyhearts* essays, Bloom states that it is West’s best, and that it “excels *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, and even *Sanctuary* as the perfected instance of a negative vision in modern American fiction” (2005: 1).

Amidst the praise, one note has also been constant throughout its critical history: that *Miss Lonelyhearts* is too bleak to admire unequivocally. The titles alone of the central scholarship of the first West revival period give some idea of his reputation as American Jeremiah: Victor Comerchero’s *Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet* (1964), Randall Reid’s *The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land* (1967), Robert Emmet Long’s “*Miss Lonelyhearts: The Absurd Center of the Dead World*” (2005), and M.A. Klug’s “Nathanael West: Prophet of Failure” (1987). Simply stated, the consensus for many years was that *Miss Lonelyhearts* was a well-written novel whose rampant sadism was difficult for even the sophisticated literati to stomach. Among the passages communicating *Miss Lonelyhearts*’ compassion for humanity, there were scenes of inexplicable, appalling violence. In a flashback scene, Miss Lonelyheart recalls stabbing, and then bludgeoning a lamb in college; in another, the main character and a friend menace an elderly homosexual man. Just prior to this scene, Miss Lonelyhearts overhears a group of his friends at the pub talking about female writers

dismissively. They discuss one who wrote the then-fashionable “hardboiled” novels, and kept company with low characters to learn their idioms. When they found out, the man recounted, “They got her into the back room to teach her a new word and put the boots to her. They didn’t let her out for three days. On the last day they sold tickets to niggers...” (West [1933] 2009: 14).

The novel is saturated with this type of nonchalant brutality. It can, and has been explained by some critics as the author’s attempt “to hurt the pain” (West [1933] 2009: 39), which is also West’s explanation for why a world-weary Miss Lonelyhearts continues to torture himself by reading his correspondents’ letters. Stanley Hyman argues plausibly enough that the horrifying lamb scene “embodies the book’s bitter paradox: that sadism is the perversion of love” (1962: 26). West seems to imply the same thing himself at several moments in the novel. In the scene featuring an attack on an old man, a scene symbolically similar to the lamb sacrifice one, Miss Lonelyhearts and his friend try to force him to tell his life story. When he refuses, Miss Lonelyhearts aggressively twists his arm. In doing so, it is explained, in another obvious example of allegorical character type-naming, “He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (18). The outward violence in this instance is only a malignant manifestation of the subject’s empathy toward the “Clean Old Man” (13), who is an embodiment of his correspondents’ letters. But even if we accept this explanation, it does not make the sadism of the novel any easier to endure. What is more, as reassuring as this idea is, it is still only presenting the symptoms of the disease, not suggesting a cure.

The negative vein of West criticism makes a number of common arguments and observations about the book, and about West as an artist. The first is to identify the author with

one major strand of Spenglerian-influenced modernism. West is frequently compared to F. Scott Fitzgerald, a natural comparison given that both of them, like many of their contemporaries writing during the Depression (although Fitzgerald is of course more associated with the years preceding it), took as their subject matter the dark underside of the American Dream in the 1920s and '30s. Fitzgerald, who famously said, "There are no second acts in American lives" (1941: 163), knew the truth of this aphorism first-hand. He had cycled through youthful literary success to personal and professional failure, mental distress and alcoholism in record time—even for an American. Although he was only seven years older than West, he was viewed as an elder statesman/washed out writer during the overlapping period of time in the late '30s when both men were employed as screenwriters in Hollywood. Fitzgerald and West were acquaintances, even friends in Hollywood. The older man had recommended West for a Guggenheim (which he did not receive), and saw West as his protégé (Martin 1970: 386-387).

Jay Martin, the definitive West biographer, observes that, "Like Fitzgerald, he was a moralist at heart, who really wanted (as Fitzgerald said of himself) 'to preach at people in some acceptable form, rather than to entertain them'" (386). But while Fitzgerald's works, especially in his later years, communicated a mature resignation ("...the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness" [2005: 153]), West's tone was always strident. Randall Reid is another among the many scholars who have noticed similarities between *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Great Gatsby*, written eight years previously. Reid rightly notes that the former novel is actually much darker in cast: "Acute misery, not unsatisfied yearning, is the universal sensation in *Miss Lonelyhearts*" (1967: 98).

Lawrence DiStasi (1973: 83) believes that West's pessimism about modernity has much in common with Freud's in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. West's novel is also often viewed

as a 1930s echo of Eliot's *The Waste Land*.<sup>vii</sup> It is known that West was well aware of Eliot and was even reading his *For Lancelot Andrewes* while writing *Miss Lonelyhearts* (Martin 1970: 184). The definitive comparison of the two works is still Edmond Volpe's ([1961] 1971) essay, "The Waste Land of Nathanael West."<sup>viii</sup> In it he points to the many similarities between the two works, but concludes that, perhaps astonishingly, West's work actually challenges the *optimism* of Eliot's (81). Volpe does a fairly conventional reading of Eliot's epic poem as depicting a modern mechanical world tainted by human immorality that can nonetheless be redeemed through submission to God. In contrast, he believes that West's universe is under no divine supervision. Humanity does not suffer at this stage in history because it has rejected any set of divine values; it suffers because that is its natural state, and because the flimsy dreams that it has erected to stave off despair are being revealed as fraudulent. Volpe concludes by stating that the painful experience of reading *Miss Lonelyhearts* is much like that of reading Eliot's work, only "in Eliot's Waste Land regeneration is possible; in West's there is no hope of salvation" (92).

The charge of being more pessimistic than *The Waste Land* is a good indicator of West's critical reputation during this period, and for that matter, today. Another good example might be a James Bowden essay appearing in an anthology of West essays in the 1970s. Entitled, "No Redactor, No Reward," (an homage to Randall Reid's earlier West study), Bowden's (1973) essay compares West's oeuvre to the Book of Ecclesiastes. The existentialist work attributed to Solomon moans verse after verse that all earthly endeavour is vanity. In contrast to the bulk of the book, the last two lines, which most Biblical scholars believe were tacked on by an ideologically-motivated editor-redactor, state: "...Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecc. 12: 13b-14, KJV). The implication of

these revisionary final lines is that the only answer to the problem of a just God allowing human suffering is that the divine will is unfathomable.<sup>ix</sup> *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Bowden asserts, is an Ecclesiastes with the last two lines removed (1973: 286). Its appeal, he claims, is limited to those curious people who, like West, “believe there is no God hidden anywhere, but who can’t call off the search” (296). Bowden’s ultimate appraisal of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (and West) as the “Preacher” of Ecclesiastes who goes on asking troubling ethical questions until he is shot (297), once again speaks to the utter hopelessness of the Westian quest according to many scholars.

It is notable that only *one single piece of criticism* of *Miss Lonelyhearts* since its publication, a little known 1970s essay by Martin Tropp (1979), attempts to make a strong case for a wholly redemptive, or positive reading of the novel. Tropp’s essay was published in *Renascence*, a literary journal out of Marquette University. It is significant that an article that falls so far outside the scholarly consensus was published in a journal with a clear ideological mandate, to act as “a Christian witness to literature for promoting the study of values in literature” (Marquette University 2010). Tropp’s essay, entitled, “Nathanael West and the Persistence of Hope,” claims that although readers generally only see the negative side of West, in most of his novels, especially *Miss Lonelyhearts*, “there is a seemingly endless fund of belief and love in the world which, merely by existing, helps purify the wasteland of his novels” (213). Tropp isolates small moments of hope in the novel: the image of children “gravely, sweetly dancing” (West [1933] 2009: 15), and the inherent dignity of the letter from “Broad Shoulders.” Tropp claims that West’s novel actually contrasts two different approaches to the problem of human suffering: “the inner and outer search” (210). Tropp moralizes that West’s protagonist suffers because of his own morbid habit of looking inward, and dwelling on the world’s

problems, rather than joining in the “dance of life,” and at least attempting to live in harmony with the larger human community (213).

If Tropp’s goal was merely to point out the positive aspects of West’s writing, he is successful. Where he falters, however, is in arguing the textually unjustifiable idea that these few moments of hope somehow outweigh the message of the other 95 per cent of the novel, which is despairing. Not only does the balance of the novel overwhelmingly communicate that human life is sorrowful and meaningless, the specific moral proposition put forth by Tropp is actually refuted within its pages. In all of his novels, particularly *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, West is critical of the individual, often an artist, who is prone to morbid introspection. (Balso advises “Maloney the Areopagite”: “I think you’re morbid...Don’t be morbid. Take your eyes off your navel. Take your head from under your armpit. Stop sniffing mortality. Play games. Don’t read so many books. Take cold showers. Eat more meat” [West (1931) 2006: 13].) But that does not mean that he advocates joining in “the dance of life,” whatever that might mean, as the solution to spiritual suffering. On the contrary, active involvement in the world is also viewed in a negative light, as one more dead end in the search for enlightenment.

This is communicated on at least two separate instances in the novel. In the first, Shrike gives a masterful soliloquy outlining the various ways a victim of existential despair can find some solace in the world. He lists a retreat to rural life, a Gauguin-like return to the primitive, the pleasures of hedonism, the pleasures of art, as well as suicide and drugs. At least some of these routes might fall under Tropp’s understanding of a life-embracing existence. But Shrike concludes, “My friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us,” (West [1933] 2009: 35). He ironically suggests that only a return to the church, “whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and

Wirehaired Fox Terrier” (35) can save them. In the second instance, a more sincere advocate for the purifying power of clean living, Miss Lonelyhearts’ girlfriend Betty, takes him to her aunt’s old farmhouse in Connecticut to lift his spirits. A few days in the countryside seem restorative at first, but upon returning to New York, and driving through the Bronx slums, teeming with the refuse of humanity, “Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters” (39). (Furthermore, as Jay Martin [1970: 197] has pointed out, even the mainly idyllic country interlude is marred by an anti-Semitic remark from a gas station attendant, among other things.). Thus, contrary to Tropp’s unusually hopeful reading of West, there is little in the novel to suggest that the cultivation of either an outward or an inner life can ultimately cure spiritual malaise. West proposes no solutions. Tropp’s thesis, novel though it may be, is unconvincing in its redemptive claims.

As mentioned, Tropp is the only scholar to argue in favour of a wholly redemptive reading. However, James Light, one of West’s major biographers, also makes a point of emphasizing moments of hope and compassion in the novel, in which he claims “the pity is greater than the horror” (1971: 89). To support this statement, Light reads *Miss Lonelyhearts* from a conventional Christian perspective, claiming that the main character achieves a mystic state of pure Christian love for all humanity by the end of the novel. This supposition is far from clear in the novel—in fact, based on the textual evidence, it is just as likely, if not more, that Miss Lonelyhearts has actually gone insane. Light goes on to compare the main character’s deep spiritual understanding (madness?) with Betty’s “fragmentary view of the universe” (87) (common sense?). He asserts: “Though there are answers that bring no peace, the love and faith

of Christ are the only solutions in which man can rest. The Christian answers could make for a better world, one founded on Dostoevsky's Christianity, etc..." (88).

Naïve Christian readings like Light's—and it should be noted that his 1970s biography is still frequently cited today—have been called "...diametrically opposed to everything West believed...[they offer] a solution to the human dilemma when it is clear that West had none and never attempted to pose one" (Comerchero 1964: 76). To read *Miss Lonelyhearts* as West's statement of a Christian solution to the problem of suffering in the world is wishful thinking at best, and a complete misunderstanding of the implied author's ethics at worst, an attempt at grafting one fully-formed system of thought over a complex and ambiguous text. Any reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* starting from the faulty premise that the text was written as either a repudiation or acknowledgement of Christianity as the only hope for humanity misses one of West's oft-repeated central messages: that no system, religious or political, can save us. This strong anti-belief is a constant in all of his novels, and the source of his absolute pessimism.

*Miss Lonelyhearts* is replete with Christian imagery, it is true, and the main character himself is obviously meant to be identified as a Christ-figure, but this speaks more to the author's appropriation of Christian symbols for his own metaphorical purposes than anything else. This is clear from lines such as, "He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear" (West [1933] 2009: 4), among others. One scholar asserts that the way Christian icons in the novel are "fractured, fragmented, and distorted point to the failure of Miss Lonelyhearts and his contemporaries to understand their true significance" (Crowe 2005: 159). But *Miss Lonelyhearts* was not intended to be a theological treatise, or a Christian apologia. It is not that West's characters, and by extension, West, necessarily misunderstand Christian symbolism; these symbols are purposely distorted to reflect a world



devoid of meaning or order. As one critic notes, West is not lamenting the decline of Christianity in the West, as Eliot did, in and of itself; instead he uses that decline as symbolic of the decline of Western civilization as a whole (Comerchero 1964: 83). This spiritual disorder is the reason for Shrike's mocking lament, "How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age?" (West [1933] 2009: 35).

## **II. Implied Redemption: The Critical Consensus**

It has been noted that ethical criticism "ranges from the close reading of the text itself...to the ethical questions that the story raises in the reader's own life beyond the margins of the text" (Davis and Womack 2001: x). This division is not always as clear as it seems—even the most objective scholars have a tendency of bringing their own life experiences to bear when analysing a text, consciously or not. Ruth Spack's (1997) thoughtful and introspective essay on this subject, "The (In)visibility of the Person(al) in Academe," explores how the identity of the scholar/educator often has a major impact on their teaching choices and scholarly work. Her article includes a brave examination of her own pedagogical decisions, for example, how her Jewish cultural identity caused her to agonize over some of her syllabus selections (21-25). Throughout the essay she contests the idea that an idealized impersonal, objective reading and teaching of texts is possible anymore (if it ever was), particularly in today's multicultural classroom.

Another example of the "personal's" intrusion into the academic world is the contemporary still unresolved conflict surrounding Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Prompting much furious debate over censorship, in early 2011 NewSouth Books released an expurgated version of the book in which the 219 (!) uses of the word "nigger" were replaced

with “slave” (Bosman 2011). The logic behind the publication of the new edition was the perceived necessity of removing a word that prevented many from appreciating a much-revered American literary classic. Many of the scholars, educators and administrators who have most passionately questioned the inclusion of this book in high school and university syllabi have done so based on grounds that are at least partly emotional and personal. John Wallace, an official at Virginia’s Mark Twain Intermediate School who published his own censored version of the book, argues that for black students among their white peers, being forced to listen to the book read aloud in class “constitutes mental cruelty, harassment, and outright racial intimidation” (2005: 266). Toni Morrison, who believes in the continued significance of the novel in and outside the classroom, nonetheless remarks on her sense of discomfort during initial readings, stating, “It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming” (2005: 279). It is difficult to explain the intense, visceral reactions of Morrison and Wallace to this book without an acceptance of the idea that the specificities of personal experience can be a powerful factor informing our reading of texts. Furthermore, once again, as in the case of Wayne Booth’s colleague, Paul Moses, discussed in Chapter One—and in reference to the same, controversial American canonical work—we see how individual responses to a text, rooted in distinct cultural experiences (namely in this example, racism), can enrich and enlarge the critical consensus regarding a particular work.

What does all this have to do with redemptive readings of West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*? The intention is to draw some attention to that second, often ill-defined and hazy, but very real world of ethical values in actual human lives beyond the text, which bleed into our readings. Criticism, I would argue, always operates simultaneously on two interacting levels: the textual

and the personal. We cannot fully remove ourselves from our evaluations; in this regard, criticism in the humanities is qualitatively different from, for example, other forms of evaluation in the sciences. It cannot be reduced to a formula yielding identical repeated results because individual subjectivities (even similarly educated ones) informing opinions vary so greatly. As Daniel Schwarz puts it in his defense of his own neo-humanistic criticism: “Texts demand ethical responses from their readers in part because *saying* always has an ethical dimension *and* because *we* are our values, and we never take a moral holiday from our values” (2001: 5; original italics). Schwarz believes that value judgements are occurring within the text automatically, and it is appropriate (and intuitive) for readers to respond to them.

My contention is that the novel’s redemptive possibilities are very real, but occur only in that realm “beyond the margins of the text,” in our own personal responses to it, in turn grounded in the complex of each individual’s social-economic-religious-political-psychological histories. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is redemptive by implication only, and is none the less emotionally arresting for all that. The oft-quoted Wallace Stevens’ lines, “I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after” ([1917] 1990: 93) come to mind. It is not always what West’s work says, but what it leaves unsaid that has an impact. The novel is particularly interesting to those concerned with ethics because of its unusually strong potential to prompt moral reflection in its readers. It does this in a variety of ways, but mainly, through its raw, forceful articulation of human suffering. Readers who demand moral closure in their literature are disappointed by the work because it does not provide a resolution to the pain, or even a half-satisfactory account of its continuing existence. This is not West’s mandate. What he does so effectively as a writer is draw attention to the problem. He is a tour-guide to Hell, and his works assault the reader with Dantean images of pain. How

the reader responds to them is their own affair; however, the fact that so many professional and lay-readers to date have been disturbed, and ultimately moved by West's writing is a tribute to the skill of the artist/writer.<sup>x</sup>

The idea of what might be called an implied redemption in West's works is common even among the negative school of West scholars. A significant number of critics have pointed out, if not always in so many words, that the author's condemnation of what *is* is ethically significant because it reveals a longing for what *ought* to be, or as Josephine Herbst states, "If there is a vision of love [in West's works] it is etched in the acid of what is not" ([1961] 1971: 13). The "ought," of course, lies at the very heart of ethical thinking. As per Geoffrey Galt Harpham: "Ethical discourse zeroes in on the *ought* by depriving it of any support in the form of appeals to fears, desires or immediate interests that might distract from its peculiar force. The ethical *ought* is the *ought* in and of itself, reduced to its tautological essence: you ought to because you ought to" (1995: 395). Works like West's that communicate a strong sense of *ought* also suggest moral disapprobation.

Kingsley Widmer's West study frequently makes this very point about the author, that his outrage is only the signal of the "soured idealist" (1982: 65). He places this within "the negative/positive division in American culture between popular and intellectual responses" (99), pointing out that the negative pose in the United States is characteristic of West's class of intellectuals. Essentially, he states that there are two simultaneous cultural traditions enacted in the U.S. The first, almost always populist and low-brow, but also represented in "high art" by figures like Walt Whitman, is pure cultural boosterism—the Alger tales, the get-rich quick schemes, the recently popular "Prosperity Gospel." The second, pessimistic strand is as old as the first, and in relation to it. On this side of the cultural debate we have figures like Hawthorne,

Mencken, the late Twain, and many others. Widmer is not the first or last scholar to place West among the American pessimists. In the introduction to the French edition of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (*Mademoiselle Cœur-Brisé*, naturally), Philippe Soupault, the French Surrealist poet, observed that Americans, more than any other country's citizens, were under an "obligation to be happy" ([1946] 1971: 112). Unusually among American novelists, he writes, West rejects this principle written into the very Declaration of Independence (112-113). Diverging so greatly from mainstream cultural values, it is not surprising that West never achieved popular success as a writer during his lifetime.

Harold Bloom best summarized some of these critical responses to *Miss Lonelyhearts* when he observed that the major sense conveyed by West, whose works he regarded as a prime example of Jewish Gnosticism, was a "messianic longing for redemption, through sin if necessary" (2005: 3). In defensive response to the grotesque realities he portrayed, West developed a highly original black humour. Significantly, his humour had "*no liberating element whatsoever, but...[was] the humor of a vertigo ill-balanced on the edge of what ancient Gnosticism called the *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness*" (4; original italics). Bloom communicates the ambiguities of West's authorial sensibility well, capturing what many critics have tried, and failed, to express about the writer. West's works, despite a certain childish tendency to shock, are also indicative of the troubled conscience of a "yearning innocent" (Widmer 1982: 65). As he noted, there was nothing liberating or redemptive about them whatsoever—quite the opposite, in fact—but they still expressed, above all else, a yearning for something better, a strong ethical sense of *ought*.

The central passage which best illustrates this idea comes almost in the exact middle of the novella. In it a physically exhausted, spiritually troubled, and nearly hysterical Miss

Lonelyhearts hallucinates, imagining himself in a pawnshop looking at fur coats, mandolins, shotguns, diamond rings, and other things, which he refers to as “the paraphernalia of suffering” (West [1933] 2009: 30). This hallucination is similar to a dream-vision, a literary device commonly employed within an allegory, or making up the entire allegorical narrative itself, for example, the Old English *Dream of the Rood*. As a dream, it is freed from the necessity of verisimilitude to life, and can be used by the author to most freely make philosophical or other commentary by way of metaphor. In this passage, Miss Lonelyhearts imagines himself ordering the pawnshop junk into various formations, creating huge shapes out of the piles of old clothes, musical instruments, and other random debris. First, he makes the shape of a phallus, then a heart, a diamond, a circle, a triangle, a square, and a swastika. Dissatisfied with all of them, he begins forming an enormous cross, one so large that he is forced to move out of the pawnshop, further and further away, until he reaches the ocean. There he adds the flotsam and jetsam of the ocean, washing up nearby, to his vast formation. He then awakens. In the middle of this strange daydream, he muses: “The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature...the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. *All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while* [sic] (31; italics added).

To clarify a structural component of the text: the first paragraph of this passage, like a number of other instances in the novel, is arguably an example of free indirect discourse. In the opening line of the paragraph, several sentences before the above quotation, are the words, “He sat in the window thinking” (West [1933] 2009: 30). This might suggest regular, if indirect, third-person narration; however, because of its relative distance from many of the statements that follow in the paragraph, it is difficult to know just which of them can be attributed to the

narrator, and which statements can be attributed to Miss Lonelyhearts. It is therefore more reasonable to classify the above quotation as an instance of free indirect speech. The rhetorical ambiguities of this type of narrative practice are one of the reasons why West is so difficult to read, ethically speaking, as an implied author.

Returning to the analysis of the quotation's content, one interpretation of this unusual passage is that humans attempt to impose order on their chaotic environments, not just materially, but more importantly, epistemologically. His creation of shape after shape—more importantly, meaning after meaning—from the garbage, including a cross, forecasts the Shrike monologue only two pages later on the various ways the despairing existentialist might find refuge in the world (hedonism, primitivism, religion, etc.). Clearly, each shape is ideationally saturated, and represents one way of imposing a particular ideological order onto unruly life. The fact that the cross shape is the last attempted by the main character is not without significance. Christianity is indeed his preferred attempted means of ordering the world. Yet Christianity, or religion in general, is not, apparently, the definitive answer. For West the implied author, the search for meaning is evidently a Sisyphean task: the cross-shaped formation of debris expands out into the crashing waves, and Miss Lonelyhearts awakens exhausted, his labours incomplete. The scene perfectly encapsulates the novel's ethos: there is no suggestion that the character will successfully impose order on this bric-a-brac of human existence, but the effort is still made. Nothing redemptive is accomplished, in the dictionary sense that nothing is saved or released, but the attempt, Miss Lonelyhearts states, is "worth while." This little statement, made in passing, contains a germ of profound ethical significance. It prompts the reader to ask him or herself, if we wholly believed in the worthiness of some human endeavour,

but knew that our efforts to accomplish it would only lead to failure, would we still struggle onward? In other words, is a lost cause worth fighting for?

In Slavoj Žižek's polemical *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), the author discusses various historical examples of political idealism run amok, leading to revolutionary terror, including Robespierre's Reign of Terror and Stalinism. In opposition to the easy liberal democratic consensus that the horrific excesses of such cases point to the essential illegitimacy of the causes they espouse, Žižek claims that they were still "right steps in the wrong direction" (7). Paraphrasing Beckett, he states that the lost cause is worthwhile because "after one fails, one can go on and fail better, while indifference drowns us deeper and deeper in the morass of imbecilic Being" (7). Other than his single isolated and unelaborated statement that "the battle is worthwhile," West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* does not provide the reader with any other explicit textual evidence of a view of lost causes in line with that of Žižek. However, because of this single enigmatic statement, and the general tenor of the novel as a whole, there is at least the implication of some saving grace in the novel; at the very least, *Miss Lonelyhearts* stands as a testimony against indifference to suffering. If its contemplation of suffering does not actually alleviate it, or even find an answer to its existence in the world, it at least has the potential to upset the reader's emotional balance.

The battle against the greater evil, according to Žižek—indifference—is illustrated in the novel in large part through the relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty.<sup>xi</sup> Betty's role is primarily that of counterweight to the excesses of her boyfriend, an "innocent Eve to his fallen Adam" (Hyman 1962: 17). While Miss Lonelyhearts is dreamy, intellectual, and removed from everyday experience, Betty is grounded and practical, commonsense personified. Once again, from an allegorical perspective, Betty is a personification of the purely physical, while Miss



Lonelyhearts is a personification of the metaphysical. Jon Whitman (1987) has identified two different traditions of ancient allegory: one is allegorical interpretation, in which the reader attempts to uncover the abstract truths being represented through narrative; the other is its inverse, allegorical composition, a rhetorical technique, in which the writer sets out to represent abstract truths through narrative (3-5). The most obvious form of the latter tradition is personification, and the term itself is derived from two Latin words which roughly mean to make a mask (269). If Betty and Miss Lonelyhearts were intended to be allegorical figures, this does go some way in explaining their lack of vivid characterization.

West ([1933] 1997c: 401) claimed, perhaps disingenuously, according to Stanley Hyman (1962: 16), that his protagonist's seeming mysticism (see the final chapter: "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience") was based on classic case studies in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. If this was indeed the case, there is also certainly an argument to be made that Betty represents James' "healthy-minded" religious type, and Miss Lonelyhearts represents his morbidly religious "sick soul" (James [1902] 2002: 144).<sup>xii</sup> The main character, who develops a compulsion for order as a side-effect of his religious mania, at first appreciates Betty's sensible ordering of her own world, but eventually grows frustrated with her. On one visit to her apartment he becomes enraged by the smug sureness of her orderly existence. In another instance of free indirect discourse, Miss Lonelyhearts or the narrator muses that, "Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not" (West [1933] 2009: 11).

Betty's clean, well-organized apartment is symbolic of her orderly approach to life, and of her intellectual limitations. When Miss Lonelyhearts becomes enraged and cruel to her, even

tweaking her nipple, the clumsy gesture has nothing to do with partner abuse. It is more likely indicative of Miss Lonelyhearts' typically feeble, and rather ridiculous defense against an indifferent universe, as represented by Betty. The implication is that calm and rational people, like Betty, are only able to be that way because they are not fully aware of all the pain and suffering in the world. It is better to be confused and seemingly irrational than organized and indifferent, like Betty. Her order, limited to the tiny sphere under her control, is actually a false one, because it does nothing to remedy the fundamental disorder of the universe. It only papers over it with its superficial calm.

Even Betty's kindness reveals some fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human life. After Miss Lonelyhearts speaks cruelly and touches her inappropriately, she mildly inquires if he is sick. His rage again ignites, and he says, "What a kind bitch you are. As soon as any one acts viciously, you say he's sick. Wife-torturers, rapers [sic] of small children, according to you they're all sick. No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin..." (West [1933] 2009: 12-13). This is the defensive response of the closeted moralist, one who longs to reject all moral relativism and believe that universal value standards do exist, and that there is no such thing, really, as mitigating circumstances affecting human actions. It is also reminiscent of Dostoevsky's fierce critique of rationalism throughout his literary career, particularly in *Crime and Punishment* through the dangerously flawed reasoning of Raskolnikov.<sup>xiii</sup> Miss Lonelyhearts would prefer that Betty condemn his behaviour as outright immoral, instead of supposing that it was physiological: a bout of ill-temper induced perhaps by a sleepless night or an upset stomach. Such a benign response is to let the forces of evil in the world off too easily. Naturally, his is an exaggerated reaction, but again, within the

context of the book's system of ethics—one which propounds the inexcusability of indifference in the face of human suffering—it is reasonable and consistent.

The “grotesque school” of West scholars of more recent years, including Ralph Ciancio, Nancy Bombaci, and Jonathan Greenberg, finds potential redemptive value in West's predilection for depicting human abnormalities. In all of his novels West used grotesque figures, as well as the stigmatized physically handicapped, in particular *The Day of the Locust*, which features two prominent grotesques, Abe Kusich, the surly dwarf, and Homer Simpson, a lurching Frankenstein of a man with possessed, twitching hands. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, physical grotesques are confined to the protagonist's correspondents, for example, the nose-less girl, and one significant character, Peter Doyle, described as a cripple with a face like “one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests” (West [1933] 2009: 45), and a hobbling gait like a “partially destroyed insect” (44).

Scholars whose focus is on West's use of the grotesque habitually link it to elements of compassion in his works. All of them echo what John Hawkes wrote about in “Comic Writers and Extreme Violence” in the 1960s. Citing West, Joseph Heller, Flannery O'Connor, and Bernard Malamud, he writes: “If something is pathetically humorous or grotesquely humorous, it seems to pull us back into the realm, not of mere conventional values but of the lasting values, the one or two really deep permanent human values” (Hawkes [1966] 1994: 140). But how exactly does a focus on the grotesque encourage, in Aristotelian terms, the cultivation of such virtues, which Hawkes describes obliquely as “a concern for humanity,” and “innocence and purity, truth, strength and so on” (140)? His brief, evocative statements do not elaborate, although one might speculate, most obviously, that viewing the pathetic and the grotesque can elicit empathy, at the very least.

This is partly how Nancy Bombaci (2006) explains the collective fascination with “freaks” in *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture*, which includes a chapter on West, as well as Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers. Bombaci is one of the many scholars who in recent years have stopped labelling West a modernist, instead preferring to view him as a proto-postmodernist (48), an avant-gardist of the late modernist period unafraid to mix low and high forms of art and culture in his literature. As per Bombaci, “In a period of American culture beset with increasing pressures for social and political conformity and with the threat of fascism from Europe, narratives that fetishize the freak defy oppressive norms and values as they search for an anarchic and transformational creativity” (1). Grotesques, in all their physical abnormality, most vividly represent “the marginalized other” (1), and thus, identifying with them is also an identification with cultural outsiders of all types.

Jonathan Greenberg (2006) makes the argument that sentiment (otherwise, human empathy) predominates in Nathanael West’s fiction over satire, and that West provides an interesting case study of the modernist’s use of satire as a means of conveying suffering in light of the discarding of older, conventional methods of representing emotion. Sentiment “reemerges in the novel in the form of the grotesque, a re-emergence that paradoxically affirms the importance of the feeling that satire negates” (591). Greenberg provides a number of examples from the novel to illustrate this point, choosing to focus mainly on *The Day of the Locust*, which, as mentioned, is the book most heavily populated by grotesque figures and situations. Some of his observations, however, also apply to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In the former novel, he states, the construction of grotesque Hollywood homes, and in the latter, a paralyzed boy’s desire to play the violin, both speak to the human need for “beauty and romance” (600). Greenberg notes that in these cases, the ugliness portrayed typically inspires compassion (600).

Insightfully, Greenberg also points out that West's tendency to reduce his characters' bodies to machines or other inanimate objects—which is characteristic of the grotesque mode—as opposed to portraying them as living human beings with souls, is also actually a compassionate response. Although his illustrations are all from *The Day of the Locust*, this is the technique frequently used in *Miss Lonelyhearts* as well. For example, Fay Doyle is described in ridiculous terms, as possessing “legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon” (West [1933] 2009: 27). Greenberg explains that “the idea that the characters of *Locust* have no feelings to be pitied but only bodies to be laughed at reveals itself as a fear of the consequences of satire” (2006: 605), meaning, in this case, a fear of dehumanization. Again we see an implicit redemptive quality in West. His exaggerated grotesque portraits seem to be drawn to inspire horror, but insofar as horror can shock the reader from indifference and prompt a reconsideration of values, horror is useful. The more West dehumanizes his characters, the more he prompts his readers to consider the ethical consequences of dehumanization.

Ralph Ciancio's essay, “Laughing in Pain with Nathanael West,” also reveals a sophisticated understanding of the Westian grotesque and its redemptive potential. As Norman Podhoretz explained, West's writing always expressed the fact that “the universe is always rigged against us and that our efforts to contend with it invariably lead to absurdity” ([1964] 1994: 81). Similarly, Ciancio locates the “comic core” (1995: 1) of West's novels in grotesque art, which takes as its foundational principle the idea that “death and finitude” render all human endeavour ludicrous, simultaneously comic and tragic (2). He also makes the clever connection between *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, a landmark American grotesque work, which West's novel parallels in a number of ways: both works feature main characters driven to spiritual distress by pathetic letters, and both speak to the impotent absurdity

of human life in the face of large, impersonal forces (5-6).<sup>xiv</sup> Importantly, Ciancio makes a point of noting that Westian absurdity and the use of the grotesque figure need not lead to nihilism (8). He asserts: “Despite the ugly deformations of spirit that accompany the stages of his quest, despite even his delusional goal, Miss Lonelyhearts evidences the will to live a meaningful life and the unwillingness to repudiate empathies of heart” (17). This willingness alone, it would seem, dulls the sharp edge of West’s irony, although it is debatable, as Ciancio also claims, that West’s novel, in artfully communicating the absurdity of human existence, somehow frees itself of bitterness.

### III. “Recognizing Our Nonfreedom”: Ellul and West’s *Technological Society*

*Miss Lonelyhearts* also appears to possess potential redemptive value when the novel’s themes are viewed in parallel with the theories of Jacques Ellul on the modern communications-based society. Ellul is a French philosopher, sociologist and Christian anarchist whose key works were written in the 1950s and ‘60s, and generally found their way to the English-speaking academic world about ten years later. In North America, inasmuch as he is studied at all, Ellul is studied as a communications theorist, praised by some as prophetic, and dismissed by others as a particularly dour technological determinist. Besides his theological works, his best known books are probably *Propaganda* ([1962] 1973), subtitled “The Formation of Men’s Attitudes,” and *The Technological Society* ([1954] 1967). They have a number of overlapping themes, most fundamentally, that the freedom of humanity is threatened by technology. This is in opposition, of course, to the popular belief put forth by industry that technology is the champion of human freedom. Instead, Ellul believes that the idea of an ever-evolving technology improving human

lives is false, a by-product of one of the great modern “sociological presuppositions”—that of history as endless progress ([1962] 1973: 39).

Juxtaposing Ellul’s theory with West’s novel makes sense for a number of reasons. The major reason, which is one of the founding theoretical principles upon which this dissertation is based, is the idea that complex philosophical ideas can frequently be most effectively communicated through works of fiction, rather than, as one might sensibly suppose, philosophical treatises or more theoretical texts. To clarify, by this I mean that the communication of particular values tends to be more rhetorically *affective* in narrative, than in a wholly discursive text. A number of scholars, many of whom would identify themselves as humanists, religious and secular, have made variations of this claim, including Walter Benjamin, Wayne Booth and Richard Rorty (who will be discussed later this chapter). In recent decades, this theory has been championed in a dedicated and scholarly way by Martha Nussbaum. As discussed in the introduction of this study, in *Poetic Justice* (1995) Nussbaum makes a case for the reading of literature by citizens acting in the public sphere. She believes that literature has a nearly unique power to engender empathetic reasoning, and support rational thought. It has the potential to disturb and move readers in a way that social science writing, for example, or even history, may not. It does this in part through identification—reading a literary text provides readers with the most intimate insights into other characters’ lives and personal motivations; we can imagine ourselves as them, and become emotionally involved in their individual trials and triumphs. As Nussbaum puts it, it is possible to read other types of non-literary writing and still keep it at a safe emotional distance, while “Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through these self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to

respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation” (6).

Richard Kearney also touches on this subject in his discussion of the function of catharsis in literature, proceeding from Aristotle, which releases us momentarily from the pain of existence through contemplating the sufferings of another. Through narrative we experience profound emotions at a remove, Kearney argues, creating a unique combination of empathy and detachment which allows us to more accurately perceive the greater meaning of any happening (2002: 138). The ability to convey emotion vicariously to the reader is noted by Kearney as one of the many uniquely ethical capacities of literature, and West’s oeuvre is surely no exception.

Furthermore, according to Nussbaum, just as literature powerfully dramatizes philosophy, philosophy provides an excellent basis for analysing and understanding literature. In this instance, Jacques Ellul is used to bring out and elucidate certain themes common to his scholarly works, and *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Presenting the novelistic and philosophical treatments of what are more or less identical subjects does several things which are in line with the aims of this study. For one thing, it shows how the two different approaches to expressing and understanding human behaviour in the humanities are complementary, drawing attention to the special capabilities, and corresponding weaknesses of both. Just as importantly, it proves the point made by Nussbaum and other scholars, that philosophy is given life and immediacy through a literary depiction. Ellul’s theory provides a philosophical (and sociological) frame of understanding for the continual pain West’s characters endure; West’s novel brings out the humanity of Ellul’s theory. The use of Ellul in this section, unlike the use of Rorty in the next, is not *primarily* to provide new insights into the text, so much as it is to show how very similar social values can



find expression through different genres, and the corresponding rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of each genre.

Comparing the works of the writer and the social thinker makes sense because of their similar views on life in the West in the twentieth century. Firstly, both are extremely pessimistic about the impact of modern technology and the mass media on human life. Also, both viewed anomie and existential loneliness as symptoms of modernity. In fact, Ellul's representative "lonely" man of modernity and West's Miss Lonelyhearts are virtually one and the same. However, whereas the novelist West limits himself to enigmatic statements about modernity, technology, and the media, Ellul the theorist provides a larger framework for analysis and diagnoses the problem, as he sees it, in detail. Ellul's penetrating, if grim view of the age of mass communications has much in common with those of Marshall McLuhan and Lewis Mumford; however, of the three theorists, Ellul focuses most explicitly and at the greatest length on the spiritual and psychological fall-out of this period on the human psyche, and as such, is the most appropriate theorist to use in a discussion of West.

Ellul's project is first and foremost educational, and in this sense, potentially redemptive. In the foreword of the American edition of *The Technological Society* he denies the charges of pessimism and fatalism, writing that he believes the course of history can still be altered by human awareness of the problem, among other things. His expressly stated aim is to diagnose the ills of the technological society, to make the way clear for the search for a remedy (Ellul [1954] 1967: xxxi). In the meantime, he encourages resistance and reminds his readers that freedom is not automatic (xxxii). Awareness of the forces that threaten us helps maintain this freedom, or as he puts it in a later book, like Marx, Kierkegaard, and Hegel before him: "we

show our freedom by recognizing our nonfreedom” (Ellul [1988] 1990: 411). Ellul views his role as being that of a night watchman who sounds the alarm.

West conceived of his political role as a writer in a similar way. He thought of himself as a Cassandra who urged others to action without ever having to say so explicitly. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley written in 1939, West praises Steinbeck for his portrayal of the valiant Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but admits that he cannot really believe in her, and he certainly cannot create characters like her himself (quoted in West 1997: 795). The trouble was that although his political sympathies were very similar to Steinbeck’s, his writing sensibility was comic and ironic, not idealist. He also had too much of an eye for human absurdity (and for literary cliché) to be able to create a character as virtuous and appealingly homespun. In another letter to Jack Conroy in the same year, he writes, “I believe that there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot” (quoted in Martin 1970: 336). He cited Marx’s correspondence comparing Balzac and Eugene Sue. Marx believed Balzac, who called himself a royalist, was ultimately a better revolutionary than the politically active radical Sue, by virtue of the fact that his artistically superior writing more accurately and expressively portrayed a flawed social system (336).

Perhaps the most glaring philosophical similarity between West the fiction-writer and Ellul the cultural theorist is revealed through their varying genre-specific treatments of a common topic: sociological propaganda. One of Ellul’s most important contributions to communications theory is his formulation of the concept of sociological propaganda, which he believes can only be studied within the context of the technological society ([1962] 1973: xvii). In *Propaganda*, Ellul makes a division between what he refers to as political and sociological propaganda (62). The former is specific and tactical—the popular conception of propaganda.

His work is unique in that it focuses almost exclusively on the latter, which he defines as: “the group of manifestations by which any society seeks to integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members’ behavior according to a pattern, to spread its style of life abroad, and thus to impose itself on other groups” (62). This process is diffuse, spontaneous, and usually unintentional. It is the means through which modern states create unity among their citizens. According to Ellul, it can only occur in a society that is both mass and individualized (90), as most are today—“mass” meaning part of a large urban conglomeration, and “individualized” in the dual sense of being a solitary unit and in the nineteenth century Romantic sense. He describes the historical process of urbanization, in which the modern individual is separated from his or her traditional small groups, at the family, village or religious community level, and displaced into an anonymous mass society in the city. In opposition to popular notions, the individual, he argues, is not necessarily more free in such an environment, but only more exposed to popular currents of thought and the influence of the state (92-93). He or she is alone and disassociated, lost in a bewildering artificial environment.

This perfectly describes West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, a bachelor newspaperman who lives alone in the city in a barren room “as full of shadows as an old steel engraving” (1933] 2009: 8). His loneliness and solitude, as depicted by West, is a dramatic, individualized illustration of Ellul’s theories. Besides his co-workers, who are only casual acquaintances, the only recurring figures in Miss Lonelyhearts’ life are his editor Shrike, who appears periodically, Lucifer-like, to tempt and mock his attempts at finding meaning in life, and his naïve girlfriend Betty. Miss Lonelyhearts is not connected organically to New York, his current city of residence. Although little about his personal background is known, we presume he is a recent transplant, like Tod Hackett, the Easterner who moves to California in *The Day of the Locust*. His recent

urbanization, for all intents and purposes, has erased his earlier history (Long 1985: 57). In regards to his physical appearance, the readers are informed that “...even without a beard no one could fail to recognize the New England Puritan” (West [1933] 2009: 3). The sense is that Miss Lonelyhearts is an outsider and loner, with no strong connections to anything or anyone. Such people are easy prey, according to Ellul, for sociological propaganda, which includes the many strands of the mass media. In the 1930s, this would mean mainly film, radio, and newspapers.

In opposition to the views of urban theorists writing during the same period, the 1960s, like Jane Jacobs, Ellul views urban (and suburban) living as unnatural and dehumanizing. In his characteristic hyperbolic style, he writes:

Man was made to do his daily work with his muscles; but see him now, like a fly on flypaper, seated for eight hours, motionless at a desk. The human being was made to breathe the good air of nature, but what he breathes is an obscure compound of acids and coal tars. He was created for a living environment, but he dwells in a lunar world of stone, cement, asphalt, glass, cast iron, and steel. The trees wilt and blanch among sterile and blind stone façades. Cats and dogs disappear little by little from the city, going the way of the horse. Only rats and men remain to populate a dead world. (Ellul [1954] 1967: 321)

This colourful if exaggerated description of the modern urban landscape is paralleled by West’s description of the doleful environment in which Miss Lonelyhearts also lives. In one passage, preceding a torrid rendezvous, the protagonist waits in the park, contemplating his surroundings. The small green space is described as “menaced” by skyscrapers on all sides (West [1933] 2009: 27). Miss Lonelyhearts muses: “Americans have dissipated their racial energy in an orgy of stone breaking. In their few years they have broken more stones than did centuries of Egyptians.

And they have done their work hysterically, desperately, almost as if they knew that the stones would some day break them” (27). This passage is one of several indicting the culture of technique, of ceaseless industry for industry’s sake. It differs from Ellul’s thought in one important way only: Ellul focuses on an entire system, discussing the individual in the abstract, while West’s novel focuses on the stunted life of the individual, Miss Lonelyhearts, in such a dreary environment. In so doing, the author makes the hopelessness of the situation resound with the reader on an emotional level, rather than an intellectual one.

For ultimately, unhealthy urban life is only a symptom of this greater problem. Ellul’s chief bogeyman is something he refers to as “technique,” which in his native French has somewhat different connotations than it does in English. His central work, translated as *The Technological Society*, attacks technique, not technology, as the culprit behind many of the problems of our age. Ellul defines technique as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” ([1954] 1967: xxv), or, more simply, the idea of the “one best way” (79). Its characteristics are extreme rationality and extreme artificiality (78-79). Basically, technique as conceived by Ellul is the means of serving the modern compulsion for maximum efficiency, speed and standardization. Out of technique, he claims, has grown the modern metropolis, international commerce and technology, including the computer, which during his time was only in an infant stage of development. According to its proponents, technique exists to serve humanity. (Ellul also claims that technocrats are very likely to co-opt humanistic discourse to justify the need for their products [(1988) 1990: 131].) But Ellul thinks just the opposite, arguing that it is now autonomous and serving its own agenda, which is continual self-augmentation. According to Ellul, technique rules at the micro-level as well, dominating every aspect of modern life. What

we now obliquely refer to as “quality of life” is ultimately subordinated by the demands of technique.

As noted above in relation to the author’s strategic use of the grotesque, West frequently likens his characters to inanimate objects or automatons. Shrike and his friends, for instance, are referred to as “machines for making jokes” (West [1933] 2009: 15). Ellul writes that “when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. It is no longer face to face with man but is integrated with him, and it progressively absorbs him” ([1954] 1967: 6). It should be noted that Ellul states that the machine and technique are not synonymous, but that they are inter-related: technique’s function is to integrate the machine into society (5). The results are dehumanizing and tragic, as illustrated by *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

West’s characters, especially the journalists mentioned in this book, are fully integrated with technique, mere cogs in the machine dedicated to the quick, efficient production and sale of newspapers. Through the process of mass commercialization, human suffering is carefully packaged and presented as an easily-digested, innocuous product. Miss Lonelyhearts’ correspondents, writing about topics as serious as rape, disfigurement, and insanity, are space-fillers whose horrific problems become entertainment fodder for his readers. As an organization, the (then) modern newspaper syndicate also runs according to the efficiency principles of technique. In effect, it is more like a machine than a collection of individuals. Miss Lonelyhearts is part of this machine, another inadvertent (but over time, not unconscious) producer of Ellul’s sociological propaganda. His job is to turn out what newspaper reporters rightfully call *copy*, coolly disposing of their problems in ten lines or less. When Miss Lonelyhearts recommends suicide in his column in an attempt to get fired, Shrike gently

admonishes: “Remember, please, that your job is to increase the circulation of our paper.

Suicide, it is only reasonable to think, must defeat this purpose (West [1933] 2009: 18).

Obviously, he is being ironic, but because this character is so ceaselessly ironic, it is difficult to know the degree of sincerity, if any, in these words. What this comment does call attention to is Shrike’s understanding, ironic or not, of their ultimate function as journalists.

As West implies and Ellul states expressly, technique does human beings a disservice by trivializing their experiences. When human emotions are placed on the systematizing conveyor belt of mass communications they inevitably emerge from it degraded in some way. In West’s literary imaginings, the wretched sixteen year old girl born without a nose writes to Miss Lonelyhearts, asking sincerely (and ungrammatically), “Ought I commit suicide?” ([1933] 2009: 3). The writer’s pain is subjected to the conventions of the newspaper genre, favouring concision, and in the case of the advice columnist, pat answers to complicated questions. There is no room in the agony aunt column for context or psychology. All this renders the girl’s letter absurd, even comical. Simply put, West and Ellul’s McLuhanesque message was that the medium degrades the content. The medium dehumanizes the human by making real pain banal. Alternately, from a Burkean rhetorical perspective (see Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic pentad [(1945) 1969]: xv-xxiii), it is not the “agency” (roughly equivalent to McLuhan’s medium)—in this case, the physical printing press and the newspaper—that degrades the content, but the “scene,” the economic and social conditions that provide the background for the communication act. Regardless of what rhetorical model is applied here, it is clear that Miss Lonelyhearts, as an agent of communication, is constrained by the tools he uses and the environment in which he works.

The triumph of technique over humanity has a crushing impact on the human psyche, even when we are not conscious of it. Ellul firmly believes that humans should not be living a wholly regulated life, living in identical honeycombs in condominiums or apartments, commuting long distances daily to similar honeycombs in office buildings, and working at impersonal, repetitive, and pointless tasks. Many cannot adjust to this type of society and become what he calls terminally “exhausted” (Ellul [1988] 1990: 58). He cites the complete determinism of the technological society as the reason for our collective melancholia, stating, “We despair because we can do nothing, and we are vaguely aware of this even though we do not know it” (219). Despair in a technological society: this could very well be the subtitle of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which is permeated by existential anxiety. Through the characters of the novel, the reader is allowed to feel this despair in a way that is more immediate—more *affective*—than reading Ellul’s social theory.

Ellul and West also share similarly dim views of the entertainment industry. They were of the same general opinion that it existed primarily to make money off the public’s need for escapist fantasies. (See Chapter Four for a detailed examination of West’s portrayal of Hollywood as secular religion in *The Day of the Locust*.) Ellul presumably theorized from a distance, but West understood the business firsthand, having worked as a Hollywood screenwriter in the years leading up to his death. He saved all of his creativity and talent for his literary works, gleefully churning out Hollywood schlock to pay the bills. His view of the film-making craft is best exemplified in a *New Republic* piece entitled “Soft Soap for the Barber,” in which he repeats the Hollywood film-maker’s credo, “Remember: The extent of intelligence of the average public mind is eleven years. Moving pictures should be made accordingly” (West [1934] 1997: 407). Based on this, and other biographical source material, West seems to view



film-making as being solely commercial, not an art-form in any sense. Attempts to make “highbrow” films only result in empty theatres, he warns (407). He never appears to entertain the idea that movies have the potential to be a legitimate art-form in their own right. Not surprisingly, his portrayal of the industry in all of his novels is wholly negative.

Ellul believed that humanity continually seeks distraction from the discomfort caused by our semi-submerged, yet conscious awareness of our own mortality. Our constant state of frantic busyness is a response to this psychological need. Ellul claims that this need is felt even more acutely in modern life because the traditional order of family and community has been largely destroyed. To compensate, we turn to what he refers to as diversions, chief of these being the mass media (Ellul [1988] 1990: 358). Television, and today, the internet, substitute for our former more meaningful collective culture. But diversions, he writes, “are always against freedom inasmuch as they are against conscience and reflection” (359). They anaesthetize us to the asininity of our lives; they divert us from after seeking greater truths or even considering the status quo.

In West’s world, the chief diversions are the media and modern entertainment industry, as well as the more traditional human coping mechanisms, sex and alcohol. In one scene, Miss Lonelyhearts is out with Shrike and his wife at a campy, vaguely Spanish-themed nightclub called El Gaucho. He observes his female companion Mary Shrike willingly fall completely under its spell, altering her behaviour to fit the mood of the place, her movements becoming “languorous and full of abandon” (West [1933] 2009: 22). He pities her and the other restaurant-goers, observing that the outlandish costumes, music and decorations are all part of “the business of dreams” (22). The nightclub is a diversion only, in the case of the Shrikes, from a loveless marriage, but within the broader scope of the novel’s central themes, from a world which offers

no explanations for its arbitrary cruelty. For both Ellul and West, the tedium of modern life is made bearable by such necessary diversions, or as Mary Shrike puts it, “I like this place...It’s a little fakey, I know, but it’s gay and I so want to be gay” (22).

Ellul would no doubt have viewed this restaurant scene as an illustration of one form of America’s sociological propaganda machine at work.<sup>xv</sup> The consumer purchases not only food and entertainment at El Gaucho, but more importantly, a taste of romance and exoticism. Even for a less than discerning cultural consumer like Mary Shrike, the experience rings false. It is gratefully consumed just the same, for want of other, more meaningful alternatives. Ellul believes that existential loneliness like Mary Shrike’s is endemic to the modern technological society. He makes the claim that in this environment, “*Propaganda is the true remedy for loneliness*” ([1962] 1973: 148; original italics). This is one of his most brilliant insights, and goes some way in explaining the American obsession with entertainment media, in the 1930s to today. Like Mary Shrike, most people realize that their chosen diversions are of little real value, but they also recognize, on some level, that they are necessary emotional crutches.

Their recognition of the relationship between the cultural phenomenon of collective existential “loneliness,” and the mass media, is perhaps the single most important similarity between West and Ellul. One of the best illustrations of this in the novel comes after Miss Lonelyhearts sees an old transient stagger into a theatre showing a film called *Blonde Beauty*, and then a woman in rags excitedly pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can.<sup>xvi</sup> These pathetic sights prompt him to muse, “Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst” (West [1933] 2009: 39). The final

indignity suffered by society's marginalized is that the media, supposedly an outlet for their misery, also degrades the quality of their dreams.

Further to this, at the beginning of the novel Shrike ironically tells the columnist that "the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America" (West [1933] 2009: 4), echoing Ellul's later view of the media as an inadequate replacement for earlier human religious and social communities. West is conveying the idea that the media performs the same role in his age that priests did in ancient times: it ministers to the spiritual needs of the masses; it placates and medicates them; it is an outlet for their dreams; and most importantly, perhaps, it provides a meaning, even if it is a false one. This is also Jay Martin's understanding when he calls the Miss Lonelyhearts letters "genuine, modern, collective prayers offered to a distant God" (1970: 186). The media had become the new intercessor between God and humanity. By the 1930s, this was not too far from the truth. Not only was the print media at the height of its influence in West's day, it was also the golden age of film. In Robert Sklar's cultural history of American movies, *Movie-Made America*, the author argues that at some point in the 1920s the cinema more or less supplanted churches, high schools, and libraries as the dominant cultural institution of the United States (1994: 122). By the 1930s, Hollywood's role as chief societal mythmaker was actually a conscious one, as evident in the films of Frank Capra and the early Walt Disney cartoons, among others (196).

Although at first glance it may seem strange to connect the New York modernist and the French intellectual of the 1960s, the social and ethical concerns of Ellul and West are almost identical, despite their varying modes of expression as, respectively, writer of literature, and philosopher. Like many, both Ellul and West strongly believed that the modern mass media had a profoundly negative impact on the human psyche. Ellul viewed it as an important part of the

technological society he loathed, a component of the sociological propaganda that made living in such a society bearable. West also viewed the media as a panacea, a creator of necessary illusions. His major objection to it was that it ultimately betrayed humans by rendering their earnest hopes and fears trivial and absurd. Ellul does occasionally exhibit a flair for the dramatic as a prose stylist; however, the emotional impact of his social message—so similar to West’s—pales in comparison to the emotional impact of the author’s work. One intellectualizes and the other dramatizes, which is precisely the major difference between the rhetorical function of the work of fiction and the work of social science.

#### **IV. Redemption through Shared Suffering: Rorty’s Thesis**

*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) is one of the late American pragmatist Richard Rorty’s best known works. In it he explains why the perennially popular human project of combining a private philosophy of the good with public political endeavour is doomed to failure, or in his words, why Nietzsche and Marx cannot be synthesized (xiv), and how moral philosophy should proceed, given this state of affairs. This quest for unification has also been a personal one, as described in the autobiographical essay, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” (Rorty [1992] 1999). In it Rorty explains how his Trotskyist upbringing, upholding the idea that the social justice project is the only worthwhile life pursuit, seemed to conflict with his other youthful interests in more frivolous matters, for example, his “private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable” interests in Tibet, and in wild North American orchids (6). It is only after many years of trying to philosophically justify the unification of the personal and the private that Rorty accepts its necessary failure.

In essence, his argument in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is that the two impulses, one for self-creation and the other for social justice, are incommensurable, in large part because of the contingency of language. Rorty invents several key terms to defend his arguments. One of these is “final vocabulary,” which he defines as the “set of words which they [individuals] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (Rorty 1989: 73). Although uncited by Rorty, his final vocabulary concept is strikingly similar to Richard Weaver’s ([1953] 1985) earlier “god terms” concept. Our final vocabularies are a mix of ubiquitous, widely used ethical terms like “true” and “beautiful,” he explains, but also more parochial and specific terms like “The Revolution,” “Christ,” or “progressive.” The second key term is “liberal ironist.” The first part of the term is borrowed from Judith Shklar’s definition of a liberal as someone who thinks cruelty is the worst thing human beings do (quoted in Rorty 1989: xv). As for the second part, Rorty defines an ironist as an individual who fulfills three conditions:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (73)

The liberal ironist is the central figure in Rorty’s theorizing in this book, often contrasted with what he calls the “liberal metaphysician.” The former of these terms refers to the type of person who conscientiously qualifies all of his or her statements with an “in my view,” or “from this perspective,” in short, the stereotypical nervous liberal, frequently accused of being a moral relativist by those who have more conviction in their statements and values—or alternately, as

the liberal ironist might assert, are ignorant of other forms of knowledge besides their own. Rorty calls the “commonsense” of such individuals the opposite of irony, and states that it is “the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated” (1989: 74). The liberal ironist is an easily recognizable type in contemporary life; as scholars with an at least passing knowledge of a number of final vocabularies, most of us see one whenever we look into the mirror. The true liberal ironist is always at a rhetorical disadvantage in arguments. With knowledge of alternate final vocabularies comes, almost always, a degree of moral uncertainty. For how can we make a sound argument when we are constantly questioning our own terminology, and in so doing, our own founding principles? Those who qualify all their statements, and speak without conviction, lack the third quality Aristotle identified as being part of the triumvirate of components that make up a good speaker: pathos, logos, and a compelling ethos, which oftentimes means a resolute and trustworthy character, or at least being identified as possessing one.

In conceptualizing the liberal ironist, Rorty has cleverly identified the chief barrier to his “liberal utopia” (1989: xv), a state of universal human solidarity. Yoked together, as they so frequently are, liberalism and an undermining irony make for ineffectual political actors. His solution to this problem is not, as universalists perpetually try to do, to find a single common vocabulary. On the contrary, Rorty acknowledges that language is always socially and otherwise contingent on circumstance. He is also adamantly against the idea that humans share some essential nature, or core self, which is not socially and historically contingent. His concern is that such ideas make it possible for us to categorize people who do not possess certain salient similarities to ourselves as somehow inhuman and therefore unworthy of aid. To begin to solve

this question of fusing private values with the public good—or more accurately, as he does, accept the discarding of it completely—Rorty suggests that liberal ironists should differentiate between a private use of irony and their public use of liberal rhetoric (91-92), stating that “Irony seems inherently a private matter” (87). Ironist philosophy, he argues, insofar as it exists, is of no use in inspiring large numbers of people and achieving worthwhile public policy goals. Theory is only good for matters of “private perfection” (96) not the human solidarity project.

Rorty does offer an alternative to what he regards as the humanist fantasy of a shared language and/or shared set of universal values. In its place, he recommends that the basis for human solidarity should not be the question, “Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?” but “Are you suffering?” (Rorty 1989: 198). Thus, shared conceptions of what constitutes pain and suffering should serve to unite people, rather than some futile attempt at discovering a single human essence. Traditional differences of perceived race, religion, and culture should be acknowledged, but thought of as unimportant when compared to the shared human capacity to feel pain and humiliation.

Significantly, in particular for ethical critics, Rorty devotes a major part of his discussion to what he believes is the important role of literature in inculcating liberal (always in reference to Shklar’s definition of the word) values. In an ironist culture like our own, one which is immediately suspicious of grand narratives/master theories, including all brands of political ideology, literature must be made to do what philosophy and the natural sciences cannot, namely, help us become less cruel to one another. It does this through dramatizing conflict and hopefully making readers reflect on the pain they themselves may inadvertently be causing (Rorty 1989: 141). He writes that “Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it” (94).

He uses the joint example of Nabokov and Orwell as writers with two very different philosophical approaches to their craft—the former driven by aesthetic concerns, and the latter by social concerns—who nonetheless accomplished similar ethical achievements. Both writers are focused on the subject of human cruelty: Orwell, from the “outside,” from the perspective of its victims, and Nabokov from “inside,” from the perspective of the perpetrators (146).

Rorty’s theses have a great deal of bearing on our understanding of implied redemption in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The main character, frequently viewed as the archetypal modern individual, grapples with the dilemma of the liberal ironist, as does Shrike. Miss Lonelyhearts and his cynical alter-ego Shrike both harbour major doubts about their own final vocabularies. As Shrike puts it, ironically but still tellingly, in an imaginary letter to Miss Lonelyhearts: “How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age?” (West [1933] 2009: 35). In fact, it is this fundamental uncertainty that pushes Miss Lonelyhearts into religious mania and Shrike into an attitude of absolute ironic detachment. In the very first chapter, Miss Lonelyhearts is assaulted by the raw emotion of his correspondents’ letters and cannot think of an appropriate way to respond; he believes in nothing, and so can think of nothing that will console them. Shrike leans over his copy and suggests some clichés about Art as a solution. Speaking in headlines, he says, “*Art Is One of Life’s Richest Offerings*” (4; original italics). Later, Shrike initiates a cruel party game, in which each party-goer must answer one Miss Lonelyhearts letter. He reads one aloud about an armless boy yearning to play the violin and remarks, facetiously, “However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on...” (53). On both of these occasions, of course, Shrike is not speaking in earnest. He is mocking some paradigm; in the first example, the artistic worldview, in the second, the Marxist one. His motivations are opaque, but clearly he is more on the “ironist” side of the liberal ironist



designation, while Miss Lonelyhearts, the tenderhearted, is on the liberal side. Their combined narration gives the novel the overall sensibility of this Rortian figure.

Clearly, both of the liberal ironists in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are socially dysfunctional, in particular Miss Lonelyhearts himself. Neither of them follow Rorty's rather impractical prescription for preserving the liberal ironist's sanity: in essence, the compartmentalizing of irony, removing it to one's private life, where it can do no damage, and be played with like a toy. Shrike carries on, ironically propounding a knowingly absurd ironist philosophy to anyone who will listen. Miss Lonelyhearts' (and Shrike's) understanding of the separation between the public and private spheres is complicated by the fact that their professions force them to traverse this divide on a daily basis. The then-modern technology of the mass circulation newspaper, as well as the celebrity gossip magazines also referred to in the novel, both featured content that blurred the border-line between the two realms. This changed media climate is also evidenced by the very personal, albeit anonymous letters for publication that Miss Lonelyhearts regularly receives, something that would have been unthinkable even a generation earlier, when family problems would never have been disclosed publicly in this manner.

Set against this background, it is unremarkable that the main character does not really differentiate between the two worlds. Miss Lonelyhearts does something Rorty would disapprove of even more than Shrike's widely aired ironist diatribes: he allows his private religious beliefs to spill over into his public life, and begins spouting his own version of Christian dogma to an astonished Peter and Fay Doyle. ("Christ is love...Christ is the black fruit that hangs on the crosstree. Man was lost by eating of the forbidden fruit. He shall be saved by eating of the bidden fruit" [West (1933) 2009: 49].) When Rorty expresses his belief that private philosophy cannot be unified with the public good, his definition of the former is amazingly

broad, grouping his own obsession with wild orchids along with a religious adherent's devotion to God. To him all of these things are merely idiosyncrasies of roughly equivalent value.

Tolerantly, he writes that you need not be ashamed of “your Wordsworthian moments, your lover, your family, your pet, your favourite lines of verse, or your *quaint religious faith*” (Rorty [1992] 1999: 13; italics added)—they just have no place in public life, and should not be pushed onto others for acceptance.

For Rorty, who is often accused of being a cultural relativist, ethical considerations should not be brought to bear on an individual's private philosophies. It is here that the Rortian understanding on the appropriate realm of the ethical and the Westian understanding conflict. Rorty's solution is a rigid separation of the two, which could conceivably work if a passion for botany actually was equivalent in most human minds to religious devotion; the latter tends to be weighted by many as vastly more important. This “solution” does not seem to ever be considered in West's novel. There is always a constant yearning expressed by his characters, particularly Miss Lonelyhearts, to find a single unified solution to the liberal ironist's dilemma. His answer is an age-old one: a turning back to the divine; however, the novel's ambivalence regarding the nature of Miss Lonelyheart's conversion (has he achieved the ethical clarity of a living faith, or religiomania?) suggests that the implied author is unsure of this solution. What is clear is that the novel still communicates a fervent desire to transcend the private/public distinctions—through religion, if that is the only way—and that this is a quest that Rorty long abandoned.

Rorty's theorizing also explains in large part why so many critics cannot wholeheartedly endorse this novel. West complained to Edmund Wilson, with justification, that he was overlooked by the public because “there is nothing to root for in my books and what is even

worse, no rooters” (quoted in West 1997: 793). Within the context of the rest of his letter to Wilson, West’s statement means that his lack of political commitment, his lack of willingness to embrace any particular ideology in his works, was the reason why both the “highbrow press” and the “lending library touts” (793), had no use for him. As an arch-ironist, he takes none of their creeds seriously, and in so doing, inadvertently causes offence. This is precisely why ironists are disliked, according to Rorty. Their tendency is to tell idealists that their final vocabulary is nonsense, which can be very cruel, knocking out the foundations which prop up the idealists’ entire worldview. Ironists are blamed, not merely because they humiliate the earnest, but because they fail to empower them (Rorty 1989: 91). This is the major reason why ironists operating in the public sphere rarely inspire mass support.

Rortian human solidarity is also implied in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, on what the philosopher believes is the only valid basis: a shared understanding of the experience of pain. As Herbst put it in her landmark West essay, in the author’s dark world, “The only valid currency is suffering” ([1961] 1971: 13). This is the book’s constant refrain, repeated to the point of almost tedium, and there are several concrete instances in which this solidarity of feeling is illustrated through actions, not just words. The best illustration of comradeship through realization of shared suffering is not the sexual relationship of Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty, but the title character’s platonic relationship with Peter Doyle. On two occasions these characters physically demonstrate their emotional kinship through the holding of hands. The second occasion, as previously briefly mentioned in the Introduction, occurs at Peter and Fay Doyle’s apartment. After witnessing a verbal dispute between the husband and wife, Miss Lonelyhearts smiles and clasps the other man’s proffered hand. Returning from the kitchen, Mrs. Doyle mocks them and quickly breaks up the touching scene. The first occasion is more meaningful because it is longer

and unfolds without disturbance. Upon meeting Peter Doyle for the first time at a speakeasy and reading, in his presence, the crippled man's heartfelt, barely articulate letter of woe, Miss Lonelyhearts firmly clasps Peter Doyle's hand under the table. Embarrassed, Doyle at first tries to turn the embrace of sorts into a manly handshake, but "he soon gave in to it and they sat silently hand in hand" (West [1933] 2009: 47). So ends the scene. Although Doyle eventually shoots Miss Lonelyhearts, providing West's most definitive statement on the prospects of the human solidarity project, these fleeting moments of compassion suggest that only a shared sense of pain can bring together two individuals, if only temporarily.

If Rorty (1989) is right in suggesting: a.) that human unity is based on "a sense of a common danger, not on a common possession or a shared power" (91); and b.) that liberal literature (as well as journalism and ethnography) is socially useful because it helps people recognize cruelty suffered and inflicted, than *Miss Lonelyhearts* might be his master-text. In communicating the fact of human suffering in a vivid and expressive way (although it should be noted that West's characters not only suffer, they also *cause* the suffering of others), West has performed an important social function. This is true even while some of the definitive characteristics of West's writing (black humour and a lack of character development spring to mind) make identification, that major component stimulating what Nussbaum calls the "literary imagination" (1995: 2), less than easy for the reader sometimes.

That he is able to accomplish this in a novel in which several of the main characters are liberal ironists, only indicates that the overall ethos of his book, despite initial impressions, is not in line with such views. West may, at heart, have more in common with Rorty's liberal metaphysician, who in contrast with his ironist counterpart, idealistically believes that a shared language/shared theory/shared ethics is possible and can help philosophers get in touch with a

universal human essence. As Rorty puts it: “Whereas the liberal metaphysician thinks that the good liberal knows certain propositions to be true, the liberal ironist thinks the good liberal has a certain kind of know-how” (1989: 93). *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a battleground between conflicting impulses: West the liberal ironist, and West the yearning liberal metaphysician. More important than determining the outcome of this battle, however, is the simple fact that the novel portrays humiliation, suffering, and pain, the recognition of which by other humans has implications for human solidarity. This ultimately redeems the novel as a masterpiece of liberal fiction, in Rorty’s sense, despite the author’s lack of political commitment.

## **V. Conclusion**

This chapter has suggested, again and again, that much of the redemptive value of *Miss Lonelyhearts* lies outside the text, in its potential to stimulate moral reflection. Its dramatization of cruelty is compelling. The novel prompts the reader, more often than not, to consider the consequences of indifference in the face of human suffering, and whether or not right activity is worthwhile in and of itself, regardless of its efficacy in relieving the consequences of cruelty. This chapter is one such extended reflection. A great deal of what falls under the umbrella term ethical criticism, concerns itself not with judging the text as “moral” or “immoral”—or even the text’s impact on the reader’s character (on the latter, see especially Wayne Booth’s “Literary Criticism and the Pursuit of Character” [2001a]), but simply how a text opens up a productive space for the contemplation and discussion of ethical questions—questions that may never be suitably “resolved,” but that are worth attending to because in so doing the interlocutor is forced, as each of us is forced, as West puts it, “to examine the values by which he lives” ([1933] 2009: 32).

One of the best, albeit very general, definitions of ethical criticism of any stripe is simply a criticism that unites life and art (Schwarz 2001: 5). As per Daniel Schwarz, “Rather than being divorced from life, our reading experience—if we read actively and with intelligence—is central to life and contributes to the development of a mature personality” (5). For critics like Daniel Schwarz, Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, bringing one’s personal experiences to bear when considering the ethical content of literature is a natural, rational, and potentially intellectually productive response. With such claims in mind, I will conclude this chapter with an example of a worthwhile lost cause taken from my own life experiences.

In the Quaker (officially known as the Religious Society of Friends or ) tradition, most meetings for worship are “unprogrammed,” meaning that the worshippers sit in silence until one or another of them is moved to speak by divine inspiration. Unprogrammed meetings are not meant to be discussions—the statement, story, or brief observation given by the speaker is left to hang in the air for consideration by the assembly for some time before another speaker makes a new, perhaps unrelated comment. At one such meeting that I attended years ago, a man stood up and told the assembled group about an isolated United Kingdom Quaker congregation whose membership had declined to just one elderly man. Every Sunday he would wait at the small rural meeting house at the allotted time for other Friends to arrive and worship with him. No one ever came, and he always waited alone. This went on for many years. The man telling the story drew no explicit message from it, that I recall, other than saying something to the effect that even though no one ever came, or was likely to ever come, it was somehow good that the solitary old Quaker waited all those years. He left his audience to sort out the significance of his words, or lack thereof, each according to his or her own understanding.

I thought about what he said a great deal that day, and in later days. Obviously, the speaker's story was not about effective recruitment strategies. I understood it from a fatalistic perspective, and the meaning that I drew from it was probably different from that of others present that day. To me the old Quaker's vigil was representative of the relative importance of human effort, weighted against material results. It seemed to say, as the Stoics would have, that while we have very little control over outcomes in life, we can control our own behaviour. In a sense, it did not matter that no one else ever came to the lone Quaker's meeting. It was enough that he was there, week after week, patiently waiting. There was something admirable about his calm, consistent dedication of purpose.

*Miss Lonelyhearts'* peculiar moral quality has often been remarked upon, but seldom explained clearly by critics. The fact that so many have chosen to scrutinize it for any redemptive quality whatsoever, usually failing, speaks to the novel's compelling ethical content; this is a work that has provoked a great deal of debate on what constitutes its particular brand of ethics. Its main themes are obvious: they are the arbitrariness and incomprehensibility of human suffering; the difficulty of retaining faith in any system, political or religious, in an ironic modernity (the dilemma of Rorty's liberal ironist); and the role of the mass media in sustaining and banalizing human dreams. This much is clear. However, what makes the novel's precise ethical stance difficult to discern is the fact that it is "a mercilessly unsympathetic novel on the theme of sympathy" (Lethem 2009: ix). Its mode of expression and its content are so violent, sordid and bleak that it is genuinely difficult, even for the most sophisticated reader, to differentiate between cruelty and cruelty ironically presented by the author as critique of cruelty.

The content of *Miss Lonelyhearts* contains very little of the redemptive, and taken as a whole, can only be justified as such with some fancy rhetorical footwork. Victor Comerchero

sums up West's characteristic mode of expression when he states, "he sounded but one note, and that was a half-warning, half-despairing cry" (1964: 167). There is, nonetheless, as generations of scholars have noted, something about this work that leaves an impression that is surprisingly morally elevating. As I have argued, its potential (not inherent) redemptive value lies mainly in the individual reader's ethical engagement with the text. Like the lone Quaker waiting for the co-religionists who never arrive, some may find something sweetly poignant about Miss Lonelyhearts' act of moral resistance doomed to failure—the struggle of the individual to make sense of a world of human sorrow. I have examined a number of possible explanations for the novel's potential redemptive value. In addition to an analysis of the existing critical responses, I have incorporated some unique philosophical responses from two very different philosophers, the communications theorist, Jacques Ellul, and the pragmatist moral philosopher, Richard Rorty, all of which might be synthesized in the following way: that those who engage in fighting lost causes, like Miss Lonelyhearts, are actively rejecting, and then resisting, the forces that be. This indicates a consideration of values, a moral choice that has been made, and as Žižek has noted, this is better than indifference. Our admiration for those who fight for lost causes, I would suggest, is often based on an ethical appreciation of their adherence to some set of values in the face of great opposition, or perhaps, in the case of those like Miss Lonelyhearts' longsuffering correspondent, "Broad Shoulders," we simply admire another human being's capacity to endure.

Some of the best commentary on lost causes and the meaning of misfortune comes from Stoic philosophy, which makes no appearance in the novel by name, although it is there in spirit. Seneca's "On Providence" might be considered the representative Stoic work on the topic of unexplained human suffering. It offers several possible reasons why a benign Providence allows the righteous to suffer. One is that adversity tests and strengthens human character; it is



comparable to strenuous activity for conditioning an athlete (Seneca 1958: 30). Another is that outstanding individuals who struggle against fate provide excellent examples of human virtue for others to emulate (34). Seneca wrote, “But look you upon this spectacle worthy the attention of a god intent upon his own work, look you upon this bout worthy a god—a stalwart man matched with evil fortune, especially when the man takes the initiative” (31). Miss Lonelyhearts may not have been a “stalwart man,” along the lines of Seneca’s admired Cato, but in his own way he was also morally conscientious. Scholars and lay-readers alike frequently find this text ethically compelling because of Miss Lonelyhearts’ active battle against unending misery in the world. In his rebellion we recognize our own, and in this moment of recognition of shared human suffering, and shared human resistance, there is something redemptive.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>In his introduction to the 2009 New Directions publication of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, Jonathan Lethem writes about West's unusually prescient understanding of American mass culture: "Which of West's contemporaries can we imagine weighing in intelligibly on blogging, or *American Idol*? (Picture Ernest Hemingway's thousand-yard stare—and he lived a quarter-century longer than West—or F. Scott Fitzgerald in a fetal position)" (xi). Similarly, Jonathan Veitch states that West's continuing popularity today can be attributed to "the fact that he is one of the most insightful critics of the culture of capitalism and its most recent forms—consumerism, postmodernity, etc.—available in American literature" (1997: 133).

<sup>ii</sup>In "Some Notes on Miss L.," West wrote in praise of the "short novel" as uniquely suited to the American cultural climate: "Forget the epic, the master work. In America fortunes do not accumulate, the soil does not grow, families have no history. Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode" ([1933] 1997c: 401). From an American literary critic's perspective, his arguments may have had some validity, but they were also suspiciously self-serving—West was himself a torturously slow writer, seemingly constitutionally incapable of producing long novels.

<sup>iii</sup>Shrike has long been recognized by critics as occupying an important, even leading role in the novel. He seems to serve as the rampaging id of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. His savage satirical voice is certainly the novel's most compelling. In West's early drafts, a number of what would become Shrike's most important speeches were originally written as *Miss Lonelyhearts'* (Long 1985: 45). For more on Shrike as, respectively, the central consciousness, and as the genuine hero of the work, see David Madden's (1994) "The Shrike Voice Dominates *Miss Lonelyhearts*," and Beverly Jones' (1990) "Shrike as the Modernist Anti-Hero in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*."

<sup>iv</sup>The advice column genre continues to be popular today in the online realm, for example, Slate's *Dear Prudence* (a.k.a. Emily Yoffe) and Salon's Cary Tennis.

<sup>v</sup>These letters were based on actual letters from a journalist acquaintance of West's friend and later brother-in-law, Sid Perelman. Like *Miss Lonelyhearts*, this advice columnist wrote under a pseudonym: "Susan Chester." She thought the humorist Perelman could use them as comic material. West ended up using them as material for a tragedy (Martin 1970: 109-110).

<sup>vi</sup>This is a much-debated issue among West scholars, the majority of whom believe *Miss Lonelyhearts* has succumbed to dementia, not achieved sainthood (Edenbaum 1971: 68; Hyman 1962: 22). James Light, author of the best known Christian reading of the novel, strongly disagrees, comparing *Miss Lonelyhearts'* final attempted embrace of Doyle, and his shooting, to humanity's crucifixion of a loving (and presumably sane) Christ (1971: 86). Marcus Smith examines this critical dispute at length in his article, "Religious Experience in *Miss Lonelyhearts*." Comparing the novel to James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he reaches the

conclusion that from a pragmatic Jamesian point of view the question of the main character's possible sainthood is irrelevant: "For James (and West as well, I think) the final validity of religious belief and behavior is beyond understanding... It was James' purpose to describe, from a scientific rather than a metaphysical point of view, that area of human experience known as 'religious'" (Smith 1971: 89).

<sup>vii</sup>The infrequently discussed apocalyptic (and perhaps revolutionary) West poem, "Burn the Cities" ([1933] 1997a) is very much in the style of *The Waste Land* as well.

<sup>viii</sup>In the 1990s, Miriam Fuchs provided an update on the Volpe essay. She argued that *Miss Lonelyhearts* not only paralleled *The Waste Land*, as Volpe did, but that it actually critiqued and parodied the epic poem as well for Eliot's ideological stance, that a renewed religious commitment was the answer to modernity's woes (Fuchs 1992: 44).

<sup>ix</sup>This is the typical Biblical response to the problem of human suffering. The outstanding example of a Biblical examination of this problem is found in the Book of Job, sometimes subtitled in modern versions as "A Good Man Suffers." Job tells the story of a spiritually righteous, wealthy and blessed man who God allows Satan to test by causing him to lose everything he owns, including his family. In a long rebuke to Job and his three false friends, God asks a series of rhetorical questions meant to demonstrate his supreme power and knowledge, and thus, the folly of Job questioning or understanding his will. ("Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?" [Job 38:4-5A, KJV].)

<sup>x</sup>This was the meaning of Tolstoy when he wrote that the best art was "infectious" ([1899] 1962: 228), and that the best artists are able to evoke their own feelings in another human being.

<sup>xi</sup>My reading of Betty in the following paragraphs is fairly conventional. In essence, I argue that she represents the forces of convention and indifference versus Miss Lonelyhearts' passionate, if ultimately self-destructive concern for his fellow human beings. For a feminist reading of the Betty-Miss Lonelyhearts' relationship, see especially Miriam Fuchs (1992: 46-48), who views it not as symbolic, but as straightforward sexual exploitation on the part of a male aggressor.

<sup>xii</sup>This claim is made by at least two West scholars, Randall Reid (1967: 46-48) and Marcus Smith (1971: 78-79), both of whom—rather naively, perhaps, given what is known about West's tendency toward intellectual pretension in his public statements as a writer—take at face value the author's claim of using James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Starbucks' *Psychology of Religion* as inspiration for the novel.

<sup>xiii</sup>Dostoevsky's influence on West is frequently noted by his biographers and critics. He is mentioned twice explicitly in *Miss Lonelyhearts*: the main character reads *The Brothers*

*Karamazov* in bed, and in another scene, his co-worker Goldsmith mockingly asks, “How now, Dostoevski?” ([1933] 2009: 25). Jay Martin claims that the greatest obvious Dostoevskian element in the novel is the character of Shrike as a “modern, less grand Inquisitor of Miss Lonelyhearts’s Saviour” (1970: 183).

<sup>xiv</sup>Besides Ciancio, see also Patrick Reilly (2003: 115-116) on similarities between *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

<sup>xv</sup>Although he believed that the intellectual in general was actually more susceptible to some forms of propaganda than the uneducated ([1962] 1973: 111), it is worth noting at this juncture that Ellul seemed to differentiate between the passive victim of sociological propaganda (in the literary example above, Mary Shrike), and the individual forearmed with an understanding of his theories on communications and culture. His works were all expressly written to alert individuals to the nature of a society he viewed as almost hopelessly dysfunctional (Ellul [1954] 1967: xxxiii).

<sup>xvi</sup>West’s portrayal of even the most impoverished American citizens’ obsession with the film industry during this period is consistent with historical fact. The Great Depression, the unnamed omnipresent backdrop in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, amazingly had very little impact on movie-going. In economic terms, films were a near inflexible good. In 1930 movie theatre attendance actually went up, and it was not until 1932 that the film industry started to lose money (Sklar 1994: 161-162). By 1934 studios began to turn profits again (161), which more or less steadily rose until 1946, its peak year, when the industry estimated that three fourths of its vast potential audience was in attendance on a weekly basis (269).

## Chapter Three

### Alger's Last Stand: West's Indian Critique of the American Success Myth

"The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. Like them, you were born poor and on a farm. Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed."

—Shagpoke Whipple in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*

"The exodus of this whole people from the land of their fathers is not only an interesting but a touching sight. They have fought us gallantly for years on years...but when, at length, they found it was their destiny, too, as it had been that of their brethren, tribe after tribe, away back toward the rising of the sun, to give way to the insatiable progress of our race, they threw down their arms..."

—Colonel James Carleton, quoted in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

"We are vanishing from the earth, yet I cannot think we are useless or Usen [God] would not have created us."

—Goyathlay, a.k.a. "Geronimo," *Geronimo: His Own Story*

In Vine Deloria's classic Indian manifesto, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, the author points out, with his characteristic caustic wit, that the ruling class of mainly European-origin Americans and Native Americans share no common Anglo-Saxon heritage of law or culture. "The Apache," he writes, "were not at Runnymede to make King John sign the Magna Carta. The Cherokee did not create English common law" (V. Deloria 1969: 11). These observations underscore the fact that there are many aspects of the American cultural experience that Indians are simply not a part of. What is more, as this chapter will highlight, the shared values of many Americans, in particular those related to the culture of aspiration, can only exist through the subjugation and even destruction of the original native cultures of America, as practiced by its own darker-

skinned “founding fathers.” Of course, these ideas are not new ones; what is more unusual is to find their novel expression in a work of American literature from the 1930s.

Published in 1934, Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million* is usually described as a heavy-handed satire of the American success story—a reverse-Alger tale—or a forewarning of the possibility of American Fascism along the lines of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, published only a year later. While there is some strong textual, biographical and historical evidence to support both of these conceptions of the novel, what is most interesting about it is that, while *A Cool Million* is a flawed work, it is also a valuable literary articulation of a *number* of firmly-entrenched, beloved American social myths. The major one explored and demolished is the American Myth of Success, as popularized by the works of writers as diverse as Horatio Alger and Bruce Barton, and manifested in West’s day through the public’s imaginings of the lives of Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and the other wealthy industrialists of the early twentieth century. This is, in short, the idea that every hardworking, ambitious American can rise above his or her personal circumstances and achieve success, usually defined in terms of power, money, and material wealth.

The novel reveals the tragic individual and social consequences of this myth, oftentimes through the figure of the American Indian. In West’s novel the Indian characters all perform a special function: they effectively act as the ethical consciences of the work. They do so in several ways, as will be elaborated in detail below; most obviously, Chief Satinpenny is the direct mouthpiece for the implied author’s major ethical concerns regarding the extravagance of American material culture and the related falsity of the success myth. Other Indian or nominally Indian characters have symbolic roles—most notably Jake Raven, whose ridiculously exaggerated, stereotypical portrayal as a simple-minded, pidgin-English-speaking “Hollywood

Indian” is a commentary on the degradation of the Indian in America’s success-driven society. A number of other common stereotypes of the Indian are subjected to West’s mockery, as roles long assigned to indigenous peoples in American culture are questioned and problematized. Significantly, West captures the contradictions surrounding American Indian mythology, that simultaneously Indians are the most authentic of all Americans, and yet their mere existence also poses the greatest threat to the ideological foundations of American life. The continued presence of the Indians reminds the Americans of European descent that they are usurpers, bastard sons at best, and that the rightful heirs of the North American continent are the dispossessed natives.

Of course, the powerful ethical message being communicated by the implied author in *A Cool Million* is not simply that European-American control of the continent is illegitimate. Instead, the juxtaposition of the Indian figure with the Alger-figure, the main character Lemuel Pitkin, serves to contrast two very different sets of values in the novel. On one side, there are the values of material success, self-improvement, and constant progress, as represented by Lemuel Pitkin-as-Alger hero. On the other, there is the figure of the Indian—most centrally, Chief Satinpenny—whose only real stated value is the preservation of the natural environment. Unfortunately, as the book amply demonstrates, these two sets of values are mutually exclusive. The sort of success imagined in the United States is almost always a material one, and material success on a grand American scale comes at the expense of the destruction of the continent, and the way of life of its earliest inhabitants. Herein lies one of the central paradoxes of American life: *that the American Dream is not possible without the death of the first Americans*. Leslie Fiedler describes this psychologically-fraught truth in his 1960s exploration of old and new American Westerns, *The Return of the Vanishing American*:

The image of the Vanishing American, however, has possessed not only Fenimore Cooper and the popular mythicizers of Sacajawea. It has haunted all Americans, in their dreams at least if not in their waking consciousness; for it is rooted in our profoundest guilt; our awareness that we began our national life by killing something vital to the New World as well as something essential to the Old..." (1968: 75)

It might be said that in *A Cool Million*, the main character, the innocent Lemuel Pitkin, is made to do penance on behalf of America's guilty conscience. The long process of his sacrifice constitutes the plot of this novel, part of West's stinging response to the Myth of Success. Lemuel represents the quintessential clean-cut, wholesome "American Boy" (West [1934] 2006: 179), who is slowly sacrificed on the Altar of Success. Jake Raven, the more minor of the two Indian characters, plays scapegoat as well, while Chief Israel Satinpenny, the novel's most fascinating character, the brevity of his appearance notwithstanding, plays the role of prophet of the American apocalypse. His dramatic monologue—notably one of the few speeches in the book nearly free of irony—contains all the book's central themes. It is also the key moment of overt ethical judgement in the work, written by an author who, despite his reputation for near-nihilism, could not resist inserting the occasional passage of obvious, earnest moralizing in all of his novels. As narratologist James Phelan frequently argues in his works, through his or her formal decisions regarding character narration, the implied author often guides the reader toward certain ethical positions (2005: 5), which, as I will explain, is precisely what West achieves in the Satinpenny monologue.

This chapter ties in to this dissertation's larger project of adapting late-twentieth century ethical criticism to the study of Nathanael West in several regards. Daniel Schwarz's list of key concepts broadly defining humanistic criticism also includes the idea, once very much taken for



granted by critics, that a literary work is “a creative gesture of the author and the result of historical context” (1991: 2), or in other words, that history and biography can and should have bearing on critical interpretation of a text. This understanding of criticism is seemingly in stark opposition to the New Critics’ “biographical fallacy,” the view that literature should never be regarded as purely mimetic, a more or less direct reflection of various aspects of the author’s real life. In actuality, Schwarz’s views are much more nuanced than that. He does not believe that works simply reflect back their author and his or her intentions like a clear mirror. The author is, however, undoubtedly present: “He or she is in the imagined world as a distortion—at times, an idealization, a clarification, a simplification, an obfuscation—of the creating psyche” (Schwarz 1989: 146). A new humanistic formalism must account for the presence of the author in some way, he argues, without simply equating the implied author with the flesh-and-blood one.

Mindful of this perspective, throughout this chapter and the entire dissertation, great attention is paid to the historical context and biographical details of the author’s life as they reflect on his works, while keeping the boundaries between the fictional and the real world intact. For example, while I will suggest, along with West’s chief biographers, that the premature death of his hardworking immigrant father had a direct impact on the author’s selection and presentation of the major themes of a *A Cool Million*, I do not confuse the misadventures of Lemuel Pitkin with those of Max Weinstein. In addition, I frequently provide historical details that are helpful in understanding the text, for example, the literary history of the real Horatio Alger. Recounting this history is important for two major reasons: it familiarizes modern audiences with the object of West’s spoof (despite his culturally iconic status, Alger’s actual works are little known today); and it also reveals how the Alger narrative has been

adapted, co-opted, and satirized for generations now by the American public to suit their own cultural needs.

## **I. Context: The Personal is Political?**

Unlike his two previous novels, *A Cool Million* was written at a time in West's life when he was able to devote himself entirely to his craft. And yet, it was also published under duress of a different sort. As mentioned previously, although *Miss Lonelyhearts*, published in 1933, was not commercially successful, it had earned West the plaudits of his peers and of many critics. Finally the young hotel manager from the Upper West Side could really and truly call himself an author. In the face of his family's disapproval, he finally plucked up enough courage to quit his job at the Sutton Club Hotel, and decamped to the farm he co-owned with his sister and brother-in-law in Erwinna, a small community in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania (Martin 1970: 219). There his plan was to devote all his time to writing a successful follow-up to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. With no steady hotel income to fall back on, and eager to prove that he could indeed prosper in his new full-time career of writer, West was under tremendous pressure to produce a third novel.

Indeed, as his biographers have noted, of all his works, *A Cool Million* is the one written the most hastily, motivated largely by the prospects of quick financial gain (Light 1971: 128)—and in some ways this shows. The book certainly lacks the creativity of his other three novels. Most of it is written in a sometimes tedious faux-Alger style, with perhaps a touch of Bret Harte. In fact, as two professors from the State University College of New York at Fredonia would discover some 30 years later, approximately 20 percent of *A Cool Million* is plagiarized more or less exactly from a number of Alger books, including *Andy Grant's Pluck* and *Tom Temple's Career* (Meade 2010: 159; Long 1985: 89-91).<sup>i</sup>

Not surprisingly, given this outrageous copying, the book was not a particularly inventive satire. It was often more like a simple duplication of the original. Some of the best satires bring out the flavour and individuality of the satirist's authorial persona, while ridiculing their chosen object of attack. *A Cool Million* sometimes achieved just that. West's imitation of Alger was suitably exaggerated, bringing to light that author's naïveté and flimsy plot construction, among other things. However, just as often it adhered *so closely* to Alger that it was just as tedious as that writer at his worst. A major common critique of the novel is that much of West's unique, idiosyncratic voice—used to such fine effect in *Miss Lonelyhearts*—is lost, buried beneath the style of the inferior writers he was imitating. The dark humanist West of *Miss Lonelyhearts* was preferable to many of his critics over the satirist West of *A Cool Million*. Furthermore, what would have been clever as a parody in short story form, wears a bit thin stretched out into a novel, even a short one.

In summary, *A Cool Million* tells the story of a naive young New England boy, Lemuel Pitkin, who possesses all the vaunted characteristics of a good Alger hero: he is honest and forthright, brave and diligent. Lemuel makes his way to New York, to seek his fortune and win back his mother's foreclosed farmhouse. Along the way, his honesty is consistently rewarded with treachery, and he is abused and imprisoned. His female counterpart and love interest, Betty Prail, is similarly abused, becoming, in her turn, a prostitute at Wu Fong's All-American brothel. By the end of the novel, the everlasting innocent Lemuel has inadvertently become the first martyr of a Fascist revolution, led by former-President (and obvious Calvin Coolidge doppelganger) Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple. All this is broad enough—what pushes this satire into full-blown burlesque is the characteristically Westian touch of inventive cartoonish violence. The subtitle of the book is "The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin," and the young protagonist is

indeed systematically and very literally de-constructed throughout the plot's progression, losing his teeth, an eye, the use of a hand, his scalp, and one leg from the knee down. It is probably this grotesque dismantling, more than anything else in the novel, which caused so many critics to roll their eyes in unison at West's heavy-handedness.

Many reviewers then, and much later, could not help but contrast West's latest effort to the penetrating psychological work he had produced only a year earlier, and it suffered greatly by comparison. George Stevens of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, for instance, grudgingly praised *Miss Lonelyhearts*, but stated that in *A Cool Million* he detected "only a straining for effect and an impenetrable tedium" (1994: 63). The crop of major "West revival" scholars in the 1960s and '70s devoted little time to criticizing *A Cool Million*. Many begin their essays with lines like these: "Turning to *A Cool Million* after reading *Miss Lonelyhearts* is like examining a paste jewel after one has beheld a diamond" (Comerchero 1964: 103), and, with admirable directness: "Perhaps the first thing to be said about *A Cool Million* is that it is not very good" (Reid 1967: 106). Typically, they then go on to state the obvious: that the novel is a ham-handed, over-the-top burlesque of the American success story popularized by Alger, barely worthy of serious study. Certainly, this criticism is not totally off the mark, but in its brusque dismissal of the novel in its entirety, it tends to overlook one significant point: that "failed" works can say just as much about the culture that produced it, if not more, than successful ones, and *A Cool Million* is definitely one such work.

In more recent years, the novel has been studied much more seriously by West scholars, some of whom have praised West as a prescient, even proto-postmodernist critic of the American culture industry. In the 1990s, Rita Barnard, who views West as a postmodern avant-garde of the '30s, devoted a chapter in her book, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance*, to

an analysis of *A Cool Million*, which she reads as a fine, forceful satire of American material culture, not as a failed satire on the possibility of American Fascism (1995: 149). Somewhat similarly, Jonathan Veitch in *American Superrealism* discusses this somewhat-forgotten work at length in a chapter entitled, significantly, “The Folklore of Capitalism: *A Cool Million*,” in which he claims that it is really about the negative impact the reification of goods has had on American society (1997: 100). Veitch also states that *A Cool Million* repeatedly sends up the “strategies by which the [American] past is constituted, appropriated, and exhibited,” for instance, the scene in the novel where the main character’s Vermont farmhouse is reassembled and exhibited in a New York antique store as an authentic piece of Americana (91). This, in a sense, is precisely what West is doing rhetorically in his rewriting of the material provided by Alger and the earlier pioneer narratives, in the novel. His satire “reassembles” and reframes the original material, drawing attention to the latent violence and cruelty inherent in them.

Not surprisingly, for critics like Veitch and Barnard, who focus more on political implications of the cultural critiques found in the work, *A Cool Million*, the most explicitly political of West’s works, is an object worthy of sustained serious study. The earlier wave of critics, who tended to read West as an apolitical universal humanist, are dismissive of the work, which is definitely less original and less ambitious than his other novels. The 1930s were a time when there was a great deal of pressure on writers and other intellectuals to define their political beliefs (Pells 1973: 153), as evidenced by the many (almost always abysmally poor-selling) so-called “proletarian” novels of the day. Older critics like Norman Podhoretz have suggested that in *A Cool Million* West “may even have been trying to satisfy the prevailing left-wing *Zeitgeist*, which demanded that a novel be explicitly political” ([1964] 1994: 83).<sup>ii</sup>

Besides politics, there may also have been a personal motivation behind the novel. Several of West's biographers have speculated that the great bitterness behind his reverse-Alger story was rooted in the death of his father in 1932 in "reduced circumstances" (Long 1985: 103-104; Martin 1970: 228). Max (Mordecai) Weinstein, who had immigrated to the United States from the Russian Pale of Settlement, now Lithuania, and had prospered in New York as a building contractor, was at one point in his life an example of the American success story. During the Depression, his fortunes declined dramatically, and his fragile health did not hold up under the strain. In words that would later apply to his main character in *A Cool Million*, following the death of his father, West said to Edmund Wilson: "From shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in one generation" (quoted in Martin 1970: 228). Although they shared no personal characteristics, the link between the lives of the fictional Lemuel and West's father is undeniable.

Based on what can be gleaned from West's correspondence, he appeared to view the novel as chiefly a straightforward Horatio Alger spoof (Meade 2010: 155) and as a warning against what he believed was a growing popular movement toward a Fascist America. In early 1939, five years after the publication of *A Cool Million*, and in the shadow of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, in a letter he mentioned the book and the probable reason why it failed to sell: "A lot of people think it is a pretty good one and that the reason it flopped is because it was published much too soon in the race toward Fascism. It came out when no one in the country except a few Jeremiahs like myself, took seriously the possibility of a Fascist America" (quoted in West 1997: 791). This speculation was likely off-the-mark. West was by no means the first American writer to discuss the threat of a totalitarian America in the twentieth century. As early as 1907, Jack London had published *The Iron Heel*, about the rise of a brutal capitalist oligarchy. As mentioned, Sinclair Lewis published *It Can't Happen Here* only a year after *A Cool Million*.

It related the rise of a populist Fascist American President, Buzz Windrip. In an early scene, the protagonist, Doremus Jessup, tries to convince a group of his peers that a Fascist dictatorship is indeed possible in their country. In response to their, “That couldn’t happen here in America, not possibly!” he tells them, “Why, there’s no country in the world that can get more hysterical—yes, or more obsequious! than America” (Lewis 1935: 21). Jessup then goes on to list a number of contemporary examples of American irrationality and fear in action: the political career of Huey Long, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the success of controversial evangelists like Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson (21). Sinclair Lewis’s point in this novel, like West’s a year previously, only made even more explicit, was that Americans were deluding themselves if they thought that the institution of a brutal, authoritarian government in their country was impossible.

West and Lewis had good reason to believe that America was radicalizing in the 1920s and ‘30s. In addition to the suffering brought on by the Depression, America during this period was simultaneously undergoing major disorienting demographic and technological changes. In 1920, when West would have been seventeen years old, the U.S. census indicated that 18.4% of males and 15.4% of females were born abroad, while almost a third of both males and females claimed one or more foreign-born parents; as a comparison, the 2000 census only indicated 11.1% of the population was foreign-born (Kyvig 2002: 11). West himself was the child of immigrants, and probably experienced anti-semitism or discrimination of some kind growing up, even in cosmopolitan New York. The Great Migration of literally millions of black Southerners to the Northern states was also taking place during this period. The introduction of millions of new immigrants and poor blacks, combined with the economic pressures of the Depression, had a predictable result. The newcomers, who competed with poor whites for jobs, were

marginalized and blamed for “corrupting” American society. Disturbingly, the Ku Klux Klan grew significantly in the ‘20s and ‘30s, extending its reach in all directions out of the Reconstruction South, to states as far away as New Jersey, Indiana, Colorado and California (Kyvig 2002: 167). Its membership during the 1920s at its peak was estimated to be anywhere between three to six million nation-wide (167). The renewed growth of the Klan, as well as the upsurge in religious fundamentalism and Prohibition were probably all symptomatic of the same thing—the older American society’s disorientation in the midst of massive social changes, and their very real need to return to comforting moral values of the past (Levine 1993: 197). It seemed that many yearned for an America that that had arguably never existed to begin with.

It was within this highly charged environment that both West and Lewis imagined a violent political uprising. If their subject-matter and message to Americans—a serious warning—were both so similar, why was *It Can’t Happen Here* so much more commercially successful than *A Cool Million*? One Americanist states that “While Lewis allowed his readers the comfortable horror of imagining how the American spirit of freedom and democracy could be subverted by alien elements, West forces his readers to realize that the very essence of ‘Americanism’ is fraught with potential danger” (Hearn 1977: 172-173). As he notes, in Lewis’s book, the pure American spirit is corrupted by Fascist forces that greatly resembled the Nazi regime operating on the continent while he was writing. While American readers could conceive of Lewis’s nightmare scenario, West’s attack on their core ideals was unacceptable. This is a highly plausible argument. West’s unmitigated cynicism was one of the reasons why his books never sold well, and why it would take decades for his work to truly be appreciated by more than a small, discerning group of mainly critics and fellow-writers.



## II. Challenging the Success Myth

One of the few critics to ever explicitly examine *A Cool Million* as primarily an exploration of American social myths was T.R. Steiner in the 1970s. Steiner was less interested in the book's "serious" social content—West's anxiety regarding demagoguery in the United States—and more interested in it as an "encyclopedia of mythic 'America'" (1973: 159). For him, the book's function was to chart "the landscape of the American psyche, which needs and creates Horatio Alger, racial stereotypes, pulp pornography" (158). As Steiner notes, in this regard, West's use of the Alger motif is actually quite sophisticated. Steiner's approach is still one of the most interesting ways of examining *A Cool Million* because he is one of the first to call attention to an aspect of West that would only really begin to be discussed at length from the mid-1990s onward: his unusually insightful understanding of American popular culture. Among all of West's culturally-revealing works, it is the one most attuned to American neuroses and fixations.

West's entire literary oeuvre speaks to this interest in expressing and defining American art and culture, notably, his associate editorship of William Carlos Williams' avant-garde literary journal, *Contact* in the early 1930s. As a distinct field of study, American literature at the time was by no means prestigious or well-defined. Among the last, possibly even *the* last of the small-circulation experimental literary magazines that flourished in the 1920s, *Contact*'s special mandate was to publish distinctively American writing, of a modernist bent. As West explained to his editor and literary patron, he favoured submissions that "Do it obviously—cruelty, irresponsible torture, simply, obviously, casually [sic] told. Not only in but against the American Grain and yet in Idiomatic pain" (quoted in West 1997: 774). Although the magazine only ran three issues before it folded, West's tenure as de facto managing editor and chief creative force

would prove to be a major formative experience for the then young, inexperienced writer, firming his opinions of what characteristically American writing should be—brief, brutal, and colloquial, in his opinion. These ideas would find expression in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, sections of which were published first in *Contact*, as well as later in *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*.

At its most basic level, the obvious purpose of West's third novel is the excoriation of the American success dream, at least as realized through consumerism. In this regard, West's novel is very similar to any number of others published during the Great Depression by his peers. As his foremost biographer, Jay Martin, has pointed out, in the year of *A Cool Million*'s publication, 1934, Lewis Corey's *The Decline of American Capitalism*, Edward Dahlberg's *Those Who Perish*, and Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons* also came out (1970: 226), the last of which is credited with giving the term "robber baron" currency. West's friend and fellow writer Josephine Herbst has also compared him to Dahlberg, best known as a proletarian writer of the '30s, who today is little-read. She writes that Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* "preceded by five years *A Cool Million* in exposing the underbelly of the American dream" (Herbst [1961] 1971: 21). Notably, historian Charles Hearn, in his work on the American success myth in the Great Depression, claims that the idea of American Dream as illusion is one of the major themes of 1930s fiction (1977: 83), and places West among the long list of writers of the time who explored it, along with John Steinbeck, J.T. Farrell, Eugene O'Neill, and others (59). Hearn characterizes each individual writer's different attitude to the illusions that sustained American life in the 1930s:

To Caldwell the dreams are pathetically humorous; to Steinbeck they are compelling but distracting; to Farrell they are shallow, pernicious, and enervating; to O'Neill they are the

last safeguard against despair; to Saroyan they are therapeutic and beautiful; and to West they are grotesque and potentially sources of violence. (83)

This is a good, very general statement on West's understanding of the American Dream, as a writer. West's work is certainly pregnant with a feeling of impending violence—and it often explodes into sight—although to suggest that West concerns himself almost solely with violence and the uglier side of human behaviour is to overlook significant parts of his vision. As one critic states, for West, “the objects of his satire were not men themselves, but the masks which men wore” (Galloway 1964: 117). If West seems fixated on violence, it is because he is most interested in what lies beneath the roiling surface of American life, how the collective unconscious desires of its citizens frequently emerge in less than appealing ways. During his brief stint as associate editor of *Contact*, he addressed his readers in a short piece entitled, simply, “Some Notes on Violence.” In it he begins by asking: “Is there any meaning in the fact that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core?” (West [1932] 1997: 399). He goes on to state flatly that “In America violence is idiomatic,” and that it would be irresponsible of the editors to suppress violent content when such writing was representative of the majority of manuscripts they received (399). By “idiomatic,” West appears to be referring to the meaning of the word as something peculiar to a particular group of people, not in its linguistic sense. In the same piece of writing he makes the claim that violence in the United States is such a frequent occurrence that to make the front page of a major newspaper a regular murder will not do—it must be a particular inventive or grotesque one.

This predilection for, and calm acceptance of violence is in his view, characteristically American, and is reflected in the national literature. Ideas like West's are common among American social historians and cultural critics today. In Richard Slotkin's noted trilogy on the

mythology of the American West, the scholar's sustained thesis is that founding American mythology still affects political discourse and social relations in contemporary America. He writes: "The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (Slotkin 1973: 5). This thesis is developed in all three books of his trilogy. According to Slotkin, the Puritans' captivity narratives give way over time to tales of adventure like those featuring the much-mythologized Daniel Boone and Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. The role of the Indian, originally portrayed in colonial literature only as a savage to be subdued, is eventually subsumed into the character of the heroic white hunter, master of the wilderness, but also bearer of civilization. The great appeal of this sort of literature, in particular John Filson's popularization of the Daniel Boone legend in his *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*, from the eighteenth century to today, argues Slotkin, is that it rationalizes American expansion West and the displacement and even extermination of the Indians (294-295). The frontiersman was self-evidently socially and morally superior to the uncontrolled, undemocratic, and brutal Indian; the Daniel Boone archetypal character absorbs the Indian's knowledge on surviving and thriving in the wilderness, and deserves to displace him as vanguard of a more "advanced" civilization.

Later theses like Slotkin's answer in some historical detail, what West seemed to know intuitively: that harmful American social mythology, rooted in the earlier violent conquest of the continent, had some bearing on the almost normalized violence in everyday American life. Continuing in "Some Notes on Violence," West gives examples from the news and the literary world that show that violence in America is such an everyday occurrence that the public is not

easily shocked by it. While a European writer needs “three hundred pages to motivate one little murder,” the American writer can include any number of them in a single novel without being accused of being melodramatic (West [1932] 1997: 400). West is being somewhat oblique here, although his choice of comments is suggestive. This brief article implies that there is something highly unusual, even pathological, about what he views as America’s tacit acceptance of high levels of violence in its popular culture. Although he does not speculate on why this is so, these “notes” indicate his interest in getting at the roots of the American predilection for violence.

This exploration is carried out in all his novels (with the possible exception of the juvenile first effort, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*), in particular *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*, both of which feature notable scenes of mob violence. The former book can be viewed in part as an exploration of this theme, one that is carried out with perhaps more finesse in the author’s final novel, *The Day of the Locust*. Other scholars have noticed the link between the two. One calls *A Cool Million* “an unintended but perhaps necessary exercise for that last novel” (Comerchero 1964: 118). Such a statement is representative of the first wave of West criticism, which, as mentioned, tended to penalize *A Cool Million* for not being more like the more “serious” West novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. Such critiques seem to overlook the fact that *A Cool Million* belongs to a different genre than these other, better-known works. Both *Locust* and *A Cool Million* examine America’s potential for Fascism, and as such provide serious social critiques, but while the former does so through the vehicle of dramatic narrative, the latter functions as a comedy, albeit an extremely dark, satirical one.

West’s method for getting to the heart of the question of American violence in this work is to dramatize the social myths that were often playing out behind it. In a telling line from the screen story he later co-wrote based on the novel, he writes this time about “Joe Williams,” a

character nearly identical to the original version, Lemuel Pitkin. Williams is also described as “a hero out of Horatio Alger” (West and Ingster [c. 1940] 1997: 745). Significantly, West and his co-writer go on to write: “Only fools laugh at Horatio Alger, and his poor boys who make good. The wiser man who thinks twice about that sterling author will realize that Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks” (745). In short, the importance of the Alger-figure to West’s understanding of the American ethos cannot be overemphasized. When working on what would become *A Cool Million* in 1932, he referred to the project to his friends as “my Horatio Alger book” (Meade 2010: 155); at the time, he was also considering titling the new novel *America, America* (155).

For West, the Homer-like Alger was a chronicler of American founding mythology, someone whose writings have helped congeal the American ethos in a recognizable form. In today’s advertising-speak, Alger could be considered one of the master-architects of the American “brand,” along with real-life figures like Carnegie and Rockefeller. And just what is this brand? Interestingly, the public conception of the Alger-ian ethos, and its actuality, as imagined by the author, are two very different things. The fact that there is such a large discrepancy between the two suggests that in the process of the telling, the myth of the American success story has become distorted over time, perhaps to better fulfill the needs of the public.

Horatio Alger’s personal story stands in interesting contrast to that of his morally impeccable central characters. He began his career as a Unitarian minister, until he was forced to resign from his position at the Unitarian Church at Brewster on Massachusetts’ Cape Cod because of acts of “gross immorality” with young boys in his congregation (Wilson [1972] 2008: 180). He then moved to New York and began his new career as writer, telling moralizing tales inspired by the young bootblacks and peddlers he came in contact with there. His first major

success was *Ragged Dick; or Street Life in New York with Boot Blacks*, which was published in 1868. Alger would go on to publish dozens of books for young people on a regular basis, right up until his death at the end of the century. They more or less all followed the same formula: a poor, but honest young boy achieves success through a combination of moral virtue, “pluck,” and plain good luck. Typically, the boy is aided by a wealthy, older male benefactor.

The evolution of the Alger myth in the popular mind is revealed in an important essay by Gary Scharnhorst, an Alger biographer. Echoing Malcolm Cowley, Scharnhorst observes that “the original Alger hero was not a poor boy who became a millionaire by dint of honesty, enterprise, and patience”—as he was conceived by the masses—“but a poor boy who rose to middle-class respectability as a reward for his filial piety” (2008: 183). At some point, the Alger hero-tale became conflated with the American success dream. Although he sold well in the early stages of his career, particularly with the *Ragged Dick* series, Alger’s sales and critical reputation plummeted toward the end of his life in 1899. He became an object of derision in some circles, even during his lifetime. Nathanael West’s 1934 book was by no means the first to lampoon Alger. Notably, Stephen Crane satirized his style and formula in a short story, “A Self-Made Man: An Example of Success That Any One Can Follow,” published in 1899. (Tongue-firmly-in-cheek, Crane has his protagonist conclude the tale by instructing other striving young men: “To succeed in life, the youth of America have only to see an old man seated upon a railing and smoking a clay pipe. Then go up and ask him for a match” [169].) Fitzgerald did the same in his unpopular play, “The Vegetable” ([1923] 1976), as did James Thurber in a *New Yorker* piece written a year before *A Cool Million* entitled, in proper Alger style, “Tom the Young Kidnapper, or, Pay Up and Live” ([1933] 2008).

During the Progressive Era and 1920s, Alger made something of a comeback. As Richard Weiss has pointed out, Alger's works were old-fashioned even during their hey-day. They reflected a nostalgia for an idealized pre-industrialized, pre-Civil War social world, one whose values were in sharp contrast to the acquisitiveness of the Gilded Age in which he actually lived (Weiss 1969: 59). During the first few decades of the new century, Alger's works became popular again because, simultaneously, they indulged the need for nostalgia, and they fit well with the prevailing social *zeitgeist* of progress, reform, and "uplift," embodied by figures like President Woodrow Wilson. Writers as diverse as Gene Stratton-Porter, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser began to adapt Alger's themes to their own works, sometimes in a similar spirit, sometimes ironically (Scharnhorst 2008: 188). In the 1920s, Alger was reinvented as a business tycoon along the lines of Bruce Barton's Jesus in the popular *The Man Nobody Knows* (188)<sup>iii</sup>, and during the 1930s and the Great Depression, he was gradually transformed by conservatives into a "patriotic defender of the social and political *status quo* and erstwhile proponent of *laissez-faire* capitalism" (192). Although many of his books were out of print by the late '20s and 1930s, the cultural mythology surrounding his rags-to-riches tales crystallized; ironically, his original books went largely unread while his name became synonymous with American individualism, perseverance, pluck, and success against all odds. It is this archetypal narrative of the American success story that Alger helped establish which West is truly satirizing in his novel, more so than the books' actual content.

Besides adapting Alger to his own ends, West also used a variety of other American cultural icons as fodder for his satire. The common denominator was their contribution to the American success dream. In preparation for the writing of his novel, he began collecting examples of American success literature and success rhetoric, including the pronouncements of



the two most recent Republican presidents, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, as well as the leading industrialists of the day, including John D. Rockefeller (Martin 1970: 235).

Significantly, West would begin his novel with the epigraph from which he also drew its title: “John D. Rockefeller would give a cool million to have a stomach like yours.” Presented as an “old saying,” it was actually a popular phrase at Brown University during West’s time there, mocking one of its most notable alumni (Martin 1970: 227). “A million” is also a trope for a functionally limitless amount of money. Given the content of the book, West’s ironic intent is clear: he is satirizing the idea that good old American gumption—derived straight from the gut—is worth more than money can buy.

West also seems to satirize Andrew Carnegie at several junctures. For example, upon being unjustly imprisoned, Lemuel is surprised to encounter his old mentor, Shagpoke Whipple, who is also in jail, in his case for finance-related misdemeanours. Whipple consoles an anguished Lemuel by saying that they will both undoubtedly eventually prosper in life, despite their time in prison. Amusingly, he states: “I am an American businessman, and this place is just an incident in my career. My boy, I believe I once told you that you had an almost certain chance to succeed because you were born poor and on a farm. Let me now tell you that your chance is even better because you have been in prison” (West [1934] 2006: 97). This satirical speech echoes those of a number of prominent American industrialists, in particular Andrew Carnegie, whose writings constantly emphasized his own humble origins and how they actually provided the proper environment for his success.<sup>iv</sup> They sound amazingly like several passages from his *Gospel of Success*, notably: “Democracy elects poor men. The man must have worked for his bread to be an available candidate; and if, like Lincoln, he has been so fortunate as to be compelled to split rails...so much more successfully does he appeal to the people” (Carnegie

[1901] 1965: 62). Carnegie's statements might strike readers today as politically naïve: the phrase "structural barriers" especially tends to leap to mind. In the 1890s, however, "The Advantages of Poverty" (the title of a well-known essay by Carnegie) were much more believable. By West's time, in the context of the Great Depression, not surprisingly, these ideas were on the way out.

Another prominent plutocrat satirised in the novel was Henry Ford, whose image is probably as intimately associated with the American Success Dream as Alger's. Ford's place in the industrialist's pantheon was well-established by the time *A Cool Million* was published. In fact, he would go on to live seven years longer than West himself, who died relatively young in a car crash at age 37. Ford is mentioned several times explicitly in the novel; for example, when Lemuel's lady love, Betty Prail, is encouraging him through one of his innumerable misadventures, she shows a fairly detailed knowledge of Ford's life-story that was not uncommon at the time, given the man's stature. She says: "I read only the other day about a man who lost both of his eyes yet accumulated a fortune. I forget how, but he did. Then too, think of Henry Ford. He was dead broke at forty and borrowed a thousand dollars from James Couzens; when he paid him back it had become thirty-eight million dollars" (West [1934] 2006: 138-139). Betty's claims sound naïve, but if they are, they are no more so than the sort of ridiculous rags-to-riches stories in books and magazines that were so popular in the 1930s. As Charles Hearn notes, *A Cool Million* finds fertile ground for parody in actual articles posted in *American Magazine* and *Saturday Evening Post* with titles such as "Gold in Your Back Yard" and "Dreams Do Come True" (1977: 170).

Ford's presence is constantly felt in the book, even when he is not mentioned by name. While both of them are in prison, Shagpoke suggests to Lemuel that he become an inventor when

he is released. He tells him that “The American mind is noted for its ingenuity. All the devices of the modern world, from the safety pin to four-wheel brakes, were invented by us” (West [1934] 2006: 97-98), calling to mind that inventor *par excellence*, the ingenious Ford who designed, built, mass-produced and publicized the first affordable touring car for the masses in America. Ford and his plutocratic kin are also perhaps invoked, more menacingly, in one of Shagpoke’s speeches, setting the stage for his ultimate rise as leader of the National Revolutionary Party, or the “Leather Shirts” (an obvious parody of Mussolini’s Blackshirts). Shagpoke tells Lemuel that he has fallen out with the Democratic Party, saying, “How could I, Shagpoke Whipple, ever bring myself to accept a program which promised to take from American citizens their unalienable birthright; the right to sell their labor and their children’s labor without restrictions as to either price or hours?” (110). This speech satirizes the views of Ford and other likeminded 1930s business tycoons regarding organized labour. Ford strongly opposed unions, despite his statement in *My Life and Work* that “Freedom is the right to work a decent length of time and to get a decent living for doing so” (1924: 5). Shagpoke represents the Fordian capitalist taken to its most dangerous extreme, illustrating this work’s recurring message that America’s unique admixture of *laissez-faire* capitalism and populism is the recipe for an authoritarian state.

### **III. The Indian as Ethical Arbiter: Three Key Passages**

As a direct Alger satire, and critique of the wealthy American industrialists of the pre-Depression period, *A Cool Million* is reasonably effective. The fact that it tends to be poorly regarded by West critics is likely because, as the author’s only straight satire, it is not an original work in the way his other three highly idiosyncratic novels are; also, it has far fewer of the

features that distinguish a typical West work. In a novel that is such a departure for the author in terms of content, tone and style (hackneyed boy adventure story satire instead of surreal humanist black comedy), there are still a handful of scenes that stand out as characteristically Westian. This is mainly because of the dark sense of humour they display, and their playful recombination of American mythology into something more obviously bizarre. They are also significant because they provide the most potent social criticism in the novel. In the midst of the faux-Alger storyline and dialogue, these creative moments are blatantly obvious. In some ways, they are similar to the passage of straight, un-integrated exposition in *Miss Lonelyhearts* (“A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper... He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice...” [West (1933) 2009: 32]), especially Satinpenney’s speech, which is tonally very different from the rest of the novel. Furthermore, significantly all three passages prominently feature American Indian characters, either as the chief communicant, as in the Satinpenney scene, or as silent, potent symbols, as in the other two scenes.

Although *A Cool Million* has long been readily identified as inverted Alger or an American *Candide*, what has not been discussed by critics is the unique ethical role that West assigns to Indian characters in the novel. They are repeatedly used as privileged moral arbiters in West’s world, their words, actions, and sometimes, their very presences, used to repudiate the Success Myth. To my knowledge, the only scholar to date to seriously treat West’s preoccupation with the American Indian in *A Cool Million* is Rachel Rubinstein in a 2005 article entitled “Nathanael West’s Indian Commodities.” For Rubinstein, *A Cool Million* is notable because of the way West undermines racial stereotypes of both Indians and Jews within the context of commercially-driven America. She writes that “acts of consumption and performance

in *A Cool Million* have the specific function of yoking, if not uniting, the two ethnic groups that in early-twentieth century popular, intellectual and artistic imaginations came to reside at two opposite poles on the spectrum of native Americanness” (105). Rubinstein’s article is an enlightening addition to the decades-long debate over if/how West’s own cultural identity surfaced in his fiction, specifically, in his frequently troubling portrayal of Jewish characters.<sup>v</sup>

West’s brother-in-law, S.J. Perelman, once stated that “West was much impressed with the Indian and the bad deal he had received” (quoted in Martin 1970: 281). West had also written a screen outline of the life of Osceola, a Seminole leader whose story intrigued him, but it failed to find a buyer in Hollywood (Martin 1970: 280). In two of his novels—interestingly, the two that are most frequently linked because of their similar subject-matter—*A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*, West features Indian characters. As mentioned, in *A Cool Million* the two Indian characters of note are Jake Raven, a Tonto-like side-kick figure who is a friend of Lemuel’s, and Chief Israel Satinpenny, a Harvard-educated “Spenglerian philosopher” (Hyman 1962: 30), who appears suddenly to deliver the climactic central speech of the novel.

Both Indian characters, like virtually all of West’s characters, are undeveloped psychologically. Instead, Jake Raven serves a largely symbolic role as the representative Hollywood Indian, while Satinpenny functions as a mouthpiece for certain social views. Jake Raven is portrayed ridiculously, in a grotesquely stereotypical fashion obviously meant to satirize popular depictions of the American Indian. His first words are “Me American mans...Me got heap coon hat, two maybe six. By, by catchum plenty more coon maybe” (West [1934] 2006: 113). Also lampooning the patronizing responses to Indians by some Americans, West’s Shagpoke Whipple tries to recruit him into his revolutionary activities by commending his “people” for their “fortitude, courage and relentless purpose among other things” (113).

Eventually, by the end of the novel, the easily disposable Jake is lynched by a mob after one of Shagpoke's revolutionary speeches. They are roused to violence and "Feeling that they ought to hang somebody, the crowd put a rope around Jake Raven's neck because of his dark complexion" (169). The second notable Indian character, Chief Israel Satinpenny, possesses a rather droll name, one which, according to Rubinstein, "evokes both the popular Puritan hypothesis that the American Indians were descended from the ten lost tribes (Israel), as well as, with 'Satinpenny,' the old familiar charge of the Jew as both 'materialist aggressor' and communist" (2005: 110).<sup>vi</sup> While Jake Raven's functions as a character appear to be scapegoat and comic relief, Satinpenny, despite his silly name, directly communicates explicit social criticism with almost none of West's typical ironic cloaking.

Satinpenny's speech is undoubtedly the novel's chief moment of undisguised, largely un-ironic moral outrage, but in the other two stand-out passages Indians are also present, if in the background, mutely providing similar ethical critiques. These three passages are, in order of their appearance: the All-American brothel scene, Chief Satinpenny's monologue, and the "Chamber of American Horrors." All three passages have been previously highlighted by the major West critics as being of major significance. Victor Comerchero believes the novel is most successful as social critique when West entirely invents scenes, for example, the Satinpenny speech (1964: 105)<sup>vii</sup>, not when he satirizes an easy target. James Light notes that the "Chamber of American Horrors" is the only section of the novel that does not fit the clichéd Alger-ian style West adopts for the rest of the book (1971: 118)—a claim I would dispute, citing all three passages, but one that nonetheless draws special attention to at least one of them. Randall Reid refers to the descriptions of Wu Fong's All-American brothel as the book's "most distinctive feature" (1967: 111), and the "Chamber" as "the real focus of West's literary instincts" (115).

These passages diverge from the Alger satire in bizarre and creative ways that were of a piece with some of West's best writing.

These three passages also all speak to West's obsession with what he views as the dehumanizing effects of the modern world, with its emphasis on the contrived and artificial. In the previous chapter, Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda* and *The Technological Society* are invoked at length to explicate the nature of the titular character's existential loneliness in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In the next chapter on *The Day of the Locust* I will apply Jean Baudrillard's melancholy conception of the American materially-realized utopia to a similar end. These analyses might both be applied to the central passages of *A Cool Million*. Once again, West highlights all that is most bizarre and troubling about American twentieth century consumer culture. The only difference is that his ethical critique of modernity is couched in literary terms, while Ellul's and Baudrillard's are philosophical.

The brothel scene is one of the most deliciously satirical West ever wrote. It is comical, biting, and marvellously detailed all at once. As a critique of American consumer culture, it is dead on-target. It could only have been written by an American. To set the scene: Lemuel's equally hapless counterpart, Betty Prail, has been sold into prostitution to a brothel under the ownership of one Wu Fong, described as a shrewd businessperson. Hoping to capitalize on the Hearst papers' "Buy American" campaign, he changes his "House of All Nations" into an All-American bordello, hiring accomplished antiques dealer Asa Goldstein to outfit each room (and girl?) in an appropriate style, ranging from "Pennsylvania Dutch," to "California Monterey" (West [1934] 2006: 126). Much of this passage is worth quoting at length, as it is so indicative of West's impish and cutting sense of humour, and most importantly, the ethical sense of the novel, conveyed through sharp satire:

Alice Sweethorne from Paducah, Kentucky. Besides many fine pieces of old Sheraton from Savannah, in her suite there was a wonderful iron grille from Charleston whose beauty of workmanship made every visitor gasp with pleasure. She wore a ball gown of the Civil War period...Powder River Rose from Carson's Store, Wyoming. Her apartment was the replica of a ranch bunkhouse. Strewn around it in well-calculated confusion were such miscellaneous articles as spurs, saddle blankets, straw, guitars, quirts, pearl-handled revolvers, hayforks and playing cards. She wore goatskin chaps, a silk blouse and a five-gallon hat with a rattlesnake band. (127)

With good reason, this passage has been called “an elaborate send-up of Depression America’s rediscovery, or rather—to West’s way of thinking—prostitution, of its own culture” (Veitch 1997: 93). Post-Frankfurt School scholars interested in reading West as a prophet of anti-materialism tend to view such passages as excellent examples of his disdain for America’s culture of consumption. This is a sensible reading of much of *A Cool Million*, particularly in light of the Satinpenny and the “Chamber of Horrors” passages to follow. All three passages creatively re-describe the “products” (including the prostitutes) of American consumer culture in such a way as to draw attention to the human ethical cost of their creation. The nature of their commodification is born of the imaginations of enterprising and ingenious entrepreneurs like Wu Fong and Asa Goldstein, who are inspired by the American Success Dream. The dedication of the merchant to their craft, the painstaking attention to detail, is also being satirized here.

Notably, one of the prostitutes listed in this passage is “Princess Roan Fawn” from an Oklahoma Indian Reservation. Roan Fawn’s room is “papered with birch bark to make it look like a wigwam and she did her business on the floor” (West [1934] 2006: 128). Her clients are served “baked dog and firewater” (128). The fancy dress in which she greets them is the most



simple of that of all the prostitutes, as she is clothed only in a wolf's teeth necklace and bull's eye blanket. Obviously, Roan Fawn's cultural heritage is portrayed by her keepers (pimps) in a crude and insulting way, but her treatment is not really any more degrading than that of any of the other prostitutes on display; all are gross regional caricatures. Her inclusion is important because it recognizes that the Indian, regardless of his or her marginalized status, is still undoubtedly part of the national mosaic, a recognizable bit player in the American cultural drama. As the narration explains, she is, like all the other women on display, "of genuine native stock" (126). Also in common with the rest, in these passages Roan Fawn's role is that of mute symbol of how American capitalism has degraded into a commodity absolutely everything it has come in contact with—including its own vibrant native cultures.

Furthermore, that this female prostitute, identified as an Indian, is also referred to as a "Princess" is typical. There has long been an American cult around the idea of noble, benign Indian princesses, and many European-origin Americans are fond of claiming ancestry from supposed Indian royalty. That Indian women are referred to as "princesses" at all is reflective of the European predilection for imposing foreign political structures on civilizations whose order they did not understand (V. Deloria 1969: 3). For this reason, her inclusion is entirely appropriate. Wu Fong's comprehensive selection of American ladies of the night would be incomplete without an "authentic" Indian princess.

Another of the three key passages of the novel which criticize the American Success Myth comes almost at the end: the famous "Chamber of American Horrors" scene, which also reflects West's strong Dadaist influences (Galloway 1964: 123). A down-and-out Lemuel and Mr. Whipple visit a free road-show in an American small town. There they meet their old friend, Jake Raven, who works for the show and kindly arranges for their employment there as

well. The advertised name of the show is “The Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate,” and it turns out to be Communist propaganda masquerading as a travelling American history museum. The “inanimate” section of the exhibit consists of rather ridiculous, typically American gadgets on display. West’s remarkable sense of the fantastic and the grotesque is on full display here. Among the display items, he describes “a Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen,” and “a Hercules wearing a small, compact truss,” ([1934] 2006: 163). The description of these items is shades of *A Dream Life of Balso Snell*, where much of the book is dedicated to presenting America as degraded and commercial, the unworthy heir of Western civilization. A number of other West scholars concur: Rita Barnard reads the deformed classical statues as representing “the loss of value suffered by high art in an age of proliferating reproduction” (1995: 152). Hercules in a truss is certainly a creative way of communicating this idea.

The “inanimate” exhibit also displays gadgets with multiple uses, such as “pencil sharpeners that could also be used as earpicks” and “can openers as hair brushes” (West [1934] 2006: 163). West emphasizes the idea of the artificiality of all of these objects—and of American cultural life—by noting that their materials were disguised as other materials: “Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and, finally, glass like paper” (163). The reader is informed that “great skill” was required in order to fashion such objects (163). Here again we see the American Success Dream inverted by West: native ingenuity is being misused in the name of a materially-defined success. Like Wu Fong’s entrepreneurial skill, used toward the ends of building a better brothel, the unnamed inventors of these objects have turned their skill to tasks unworthy of themselves. The

message conveyed by the Chamber of American Horrors is hideous waste—waste of abundant talent and abundant materials.

On the other hand, from a Benjaminian perspective—one which, broadly speaking, adopts a descriptive, rather than prescriptive approach to cultural studies—the bizarre items on display here can be viewed as something more than objects of mockery. In the posthumously published *Arcades Project*, one of the topic groupings (or “convolutes”) features Benjamin’s reflections and selected excerpts on the social mania of collectors and collecting. Among the insights that can be gleaned from these enigmatic fragments is the idea that collecting reflects a desire to stave off the natural dispersion and disintegration of things (Benjamin 1999: 211). The collection is governed by its own peculiar logic: that of completeness, not utility (204); it is a “grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system...” (204-205). In other words, the objects being collected are infused with a meaning beyond their mere physicality. They are a frozen, perfect world, representative of one particular moment in historical time. The commercial gadgets on display in the “Chamber of American Horrors” scene are a collection in Benjamin’s sense of being allegorical: they speak to an epoch in the history of America. They are cultural remnants useful in explicating the past.

By most definitions, the inanimate portion of the Chamber is composed largely of kitsch, a term that originated in Germany in the nineteenth century in reference to cheap art works available to the general public. Today the word has developed decidedly negative connotations. It is used to refer to a wide array of artistic and cultural products, usually mass-produced, shoddily constructed, and made to appeal to the most sentimental of tastes. In the 1920s, Benjamin characteristically conceived of kitsch as the “outer cast in dreams,” (2005: 236),

recognizing the totemic power of commonplace objects in the psyche of the individual. In the 1930s, Clement Greenberg used it in an American context in the influential Marxist-influenced essay on the topic, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” ([1939] 2005). In it, Greenberg unfavourably compares kitsch to avant-garde art, making classical high versus low art distinctions. He identifies kitsch as a product of the Western European industrial revolution and the spread of universal literacy (5). While avant-garde art (today much of what he defines as such is associated with “high” modernism) expresses the process of creating art itself, and is essentially content-less, he argues that kitsch—including Hollywood films, Tin Pan Alley songs, and Norman Rockwell magazine covers—is simple, and representational, communicating obvious moral messages designed to appeal to the mass public. Enjoying avant-garde art requires “conditioning” (11), and an advanced education, but kitsch can be effortlessly enjoyed as pre-digested art (9).

In Matei Calinescu’s fascinating work on the aesthetic and intellectual aspects of modernity, *The Five Faces of Modernity* (1987), an entire chapter is devoted to kitsch, that typical by-product of modernity. For Calinescu, kitsch is primarily a bourgeois phenomenon. It represents, above all, a certain type of middle-class hedonism, one characterized by “the *desire to consume* to the point that consumption becomes a sort of regulating social ideal” (245). This is similar to how Baudrillard describes affluence in a consumer society, as “merely the accumulation of *signs* of happiness” ([1970] 1998: 31). West’s chamber of ingenious, entirely superfluous goods, as well as the other instances of kitsch in the novel, are oddly melancholy for all of the reasons outlined by Benjamin, Greenberg and Calinescu. They are dream-objects, born of yearning. As will be argued at length in the fourth chapter on *The Day of the Locust*, West is fascinated by the Hollywood film industry as a manifestation of spiritual longing in American

culture. His explorations of kitsch in *A Cool Million* and his other works are similarly motivated: from his perspective, they are indicative of cultural decay. In comparison with what de Gaulle reportedly said: “How can you govern a country that has 246 different kinds of cheese?” one might say about America, “How can you govern a country that has 246 different kinds of shoe horns?” In other words, what ails America that it creates such a proliferation of useless goods for consumption? West provides no answer, although he elaborates on the problem further in the second part of the exhibition.

The “animate” part of the exhibition also provides a revealing look into the American psyche. A short tableau is presented, called, “The Pageant of America or a Curse on Columbus.” In it, “Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death” (West [1934] 2006: 163). The presenter, a minor character named Sylvanus Snodgrasse, true to the propagandistic intent of the show, then makes a speech linking the animate and inanimate exhibits as cause and effect. This is followed by the pointed remark from the narrator: “His arguments were not very convincing, however” (164).

Clearly, the animated exhibit is a very heavy-handed social critique, although a valid one. In order to create the many fantastic goods for consumption in the inanimate section, the humanity of other Americans portrayed in the animate section—including the first Americans, the Indians—had to be denied. The commercial civilization that emerged in the United States spurs the kind of ingenuity that created the kitsch on display in the inanimate exhibit. Unfortunately, as West never tires of pointing out in *A Cool Million*, it is rooted in violence, specifically violence toward native peoples, and other, later groups, like blacks. The entire passage is presented ironically in the narrative as dark socialist propaganda meant to politically convert the incredulous Lemuel and company (the former of whom, all the while, is unwittingly

succumbing to Shagpoke Whipple's competing far-right Fascist propaganda). Characteristically for an author whose ethical messages are so rarely delivered without some protective coating of irony, as a stand-alone passage it is not clear whether or not it is meant to be read as "straight" ethical critique of American society. Read within the context of the entire novel, however, it is evident that it is indeed an earnest critique of American consumer culture, albeit one which does not align itself with a particular political ideology.

Before examining Satinpenny's important speech, the third (and second chronologically) of the novel's three key passages deconstructing American mythology, some further explanation of the place of the Indian in the collective American psyche is needed. First of all, it is by no means coincidental that West makes an Indian the mouthpiece of the novel's most explicit rendering of its central themes. The figure of the Indian has long held an unusual position in the collective American imagination. On the one hand, the Indian is viewed (quite correctly, in one sense of the word) as the most *authentic* of all Americans. On the other, he or she stands squarely in the face of American progress, and must be neutralized physically, politically, and especially "spiritually," in that the pre-industrial world that he or she represents is in conflict with the guiding American ethos of material progress.<sup>viii</sup>

The figure of the Indian lurks in canonical American literary and cultural theory even when he or she is not mentioned explicitly. The Indian is silent, invisible, omnipresent, the sort of universal guilty conscience that Leslie Fiedler imagines in *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968). He is there, in the shadows, in Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation* thesis that Americans derive identity from the physical landscape of the continent, rather than, as their European ancestors did, familial or societal bonds (1986: 13)—for how can Americans derive their sense of self from a land they usurped from others, others whose relationship with the land

pre-dated theirs by countless generations? He is there, in the distant background, in much of the theory on the American West, including the Turner Thesis of expansion Westward defining a nation, and Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* ([1950] 1970), a work which provided an excellent exploration of three prevailing symbolic conceptions of the West throughout American history without ever having to discuss Indians substantively. He is also there, conspicuous in his absence, when R.W.B. Lewis theorizes the "American Adam," that recurring fictional character symbolizing "the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1955: 1). Lewis presents Natty Bumppo as an example of this archetype (91); his loyal companion, the Mohican Chingachgook, does not appear to qualify.

There is something damning about the fact that the Indian is simultaneously so central to American cultural mythology, and so absent from it. Vine Deloria hit at the heart of this strange state of affairs when he wrote that "To be an Indian in modern American society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical" (1969: 2). This is in large part because, as many scholars have rightfully noted, while Native Americans are very real, the "Indian,"—a European construction with a name reflecting Columbus's mistaken belief that he had reached the Indies—has never existed. In the American mind, even today to some extent, the authentic Indian is still some romanticized version of the pre-European contact Native (Berkhofer 1978: 28). For example, in Comanche writer Paul Chaat Smith's marvellously titled book of essays, *Everything You Know about Indians is Wrong* (2009), the author mentions a trip to the Natural History Museum in Regina, Saskatchewan. Chaat Smith, who is also a curator for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, is initially impressed by the thoughtful exhibits in a wing of the museum dedicated to Native peoples of the region, but finally, also troubled by them.

He asks himself: “Why are we in this museum at all? The English and the Ukrainians and the Germans aren’t here. Only us, next to the dinosaurs” (24).

This quotation speaks to the idea that North Americans of European descent are perfectly comfortable with Indians—just as long as they are extinct. Louise Barnett charts the evolution of early depictions of American Indians by colonists in *The Ignoble Savage* (1975). She notes that the bloodthirsty savages portrayed in early captivity narratives eventually gave way to more sympathetic depictions in the later frontier narratives; this was no doubt because the entrenched, more secure white pioneers no longer considered Indians to be a threat to their physical and material security, and could afford to be more generous to their largely vanquished enemies (49). In fact, many frontier romances of the 1800s, most famously, perhaps, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* ([1826] 1965), chose the popular and romantic “last red man” theme (Barnett 1975: 41). White readers thoroughly enjoyed weeping over the fate of the noble literary Indian, while all around them less picturesque native peoples were being forced off their lands and deprived of their cultural heritage systematically, by government policy. For the European Americans, the fate of Indians, whether deemed “noble” or “savage,” was foreordained. As one scholar puts it:

The noble Indian deserved White pity for his condition and his passing, but his way of life no less than that of the ignoble savage demanded censure according to the scale of progress and the passage of history. For this reason, American artists and authors could never espouse the thoroughgoing primitivism of their European counterparts. What American authors preached in their novels, plays, and poems about the *inevitability of civilization superseding savagery*, regardless of their nobility, American schoolchildren learned in their textbooks. (Berkhofer 1978: 91; italics added)



Living, breathing Indians, contemporaneous with “civilization,” personify values that are in conflict with mainstream American culture. Furthermore, when material progress is sacrosanct in a culture, it is easier to justify its casualties. While Americans disingenuously mourned the passing of Indian civilizations on their continent, they simultaneously preserved the idea of the Indians’ unique connection to the land—and in so doing, arguably granted the indigenous people a certain moral high ground in other questions as well. In Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (1998), the author argues that Americans have long appropriated Native attire and culture to fulfill their own psychological needs. Beginning with the Boston Tea Party in 1773, when colonists asserted their political rights by disguising themselves as Mohawks and dumping tea in the Boston Harbour, Anglo-Americans have periodically taken on Indian identities. Deloria states that “Indianness has, above all, represented identities that are unquestionably American” (183), and that by temporarily playing Indian, Americans could enjoy freedom from an entrenched social order, while maintaining the stability and other benefits of Western civilization (185). They could be civilized and savage at once. Deloria notes that the two major moments in American history when appropriating an Indian identity became critical were “the Revolution, which rested on the creation of a national identity, and modernity, which has used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life” (7).

In *A Cool Million*, the critical Chief Satinpenny scene is a literary example of Nathanael West the implied author “playing Indian” in large part for just this reason. Although the entire novella is satirical, and is thus an ethical critique on the part of the author, the Satinpenny monologue is a moment of pure, concentrated moral condemnation. One of the reasons this passage stands out for the reader is that it is poorly integrated into the narrative as a whole:

Satinpenny appears suddenly, gives one long speech, and rapidly disappears for the rest of the novel. Clearly, his purpose is entirely rhetorical—he exists only for the purpose of delivering one crucial message. Despite its rather abrupt appearance, the passage is vital because it provides the most forceful articulation of all of the novel’s central themes. An attempt is made to stick to the overt satirical mode of most of the rest of the work, but it is not consistent throughout the passage. Satinpenny’s speech is too earnest to be funny, but still too farcical to be taken wholly seriously. This somewhat undermines his message,<sup>ix</sup> which is one of great ethical weight. He alternates between references that showcase his Harvard education (citing Spengler and Valéry)—providing a genteel education for Satinpenny is one example of West’s inversion of Indian stereotypes—and clichéd pidgin English, stirring his tribe up to revolt against the hated “paleface” (West [1934] 2006: 156).

The major target of Satinpenny’s diatribe is American consumer culture, the culture of the endless acquisition of the disposable; as an adjunct to this, quite typically for an Indian depicted by a white, he is also made to lament the destruction of the natural environment. He begins his harangue by saying, “In our father’s memory this was a fair, sweet land, where a man could hear his heart beat without wondering if what he heard wasn’t an alarm clock, where a man could fill his nose with pleasant flower odors without finding that they came from a bottle” (West [1934] 2006: 156). He goes on in this passage, which is a precursor to the “American Chambers of Horrors’ cataloguing of useless gadgets or kitsch, to list all of the gimcracks made by the palefaces since their arrival on the continent: “clever cigarette lighters,” “superb fountain pens,” “key rings, watch fobs, leatherette satchels,” and a great deal more (156). In a phrase much-repeated by critics when discussing this book’s anti-materialist themes, Satinpenny calls this proliferation of junk a “surfeit of shoddy” (157).

As an Indian character, Satinpenny is uniquely qualified to bear this message of moral condemnation. He is authentically American in a sense, but is also, as representative of a defeated people, outside the bounds of the Success Myth, and thus possesses the ethical objectivity necessary to criticize the European-descended American elite for their destructive materialism. The material basis of the American Success Myth is obviously being criticized, as it is in the other two key scenes identified in the novel. Myths regarding Indians are also being problematized in the figure of Satinpenny. Satinpenny is playing the conventional role of the Indian as environmental steward (cue the single rolling tear), and technological Luddite. These are blatant clichés. As a number of native writers have shown, despite their romanticization, many Indian societies have valued outsider technologies, appropriating them for their own use when deemed useful (Smith 2009: 20). West responds to this reality by challenging the authenticity of the idea of Indian as nature-lover. Firstly, he does so through Israel Satinpenny's name, which is an amalgam of a clichéd Native American one, and that of the Jewish hucksters that West so frequently attacks in his novels—one example in this one is the mercenary Asa Goldstein, a Jewish interior decorator who sets off Lemuel's train of misfortunes by purchasing Lemuel's house from the mortgage holder. Satinpenny is connected to the supposedly acquisitive Jews like Goldstein through his first and last names. Secondly, Satinpenny's Indian identity is complicated by West through his Harvard education, surfacing in his speech, which provides a patina of civilization inappropriate to an Indian "chief" who assures his "horde of blood-crazed savages" ([1934] 2006: 8): "Don't mistake me, Indians. I'm no Rousseauistic philosopher" (157).

Satinpenny's anti-materialist soliloquy actually echoes the earlier words of Henry Ford, that figure so intimately associated with both the American Success Dream and the quick,

efficient standardization, or Fordization, of the production of goods. Given the fact that Ford's figure looms large throughout the novel, and that he was one of the architects of American consumer culture in the 1930s, it is interesting to compare the real man's perspective on it with those communicated in the novel, especially though the utterances of that chief critic of rapacious capitalism, Satinpenny. In his biography, Ford writes: "Progress, as the world has thus far known it, is accompanied by a great increase in the things of life...There is no adequate realization of the large proportion of the labour and material of industry that is used in furnishing the world with its trumpery and trinkets, which are made only to be sold, and are bought merely to be owned" (1924: 268). Such statements are comparable to Satinpenny's, who laments the proliferation of gimmicky commercial goods: "Now even the Grand Canyon will no longer hold razor blades. Now the dam, O warriors, has broken, and he [the white man] is up to this neck in the articles of his manufacture" (West [1934] 2006: 157).

Both Ford and West's Satinpenny articulate and attempt to come to grips with what might be called the "Fordian dilemma"—what historian Warren Susman views as the major cultural conflict of 1920s and '30s America between the older producer culture and the new consumption-based "culture of abundance" (1985: xx). In Ford's case, this dilemma was a very personal and ethically-fraught one: there was a major contradiction between his professed values of hard-work, thrift and productivity, and those he unknowingly helped foster, associated with advanced capitalism—acquisitiveness and materialism. As Susman has pointed out, the contradictions that emerged most glaringly in Ford's later years paralleled those of the greater American society of the 1930s (140). Ford became increasingly interested in Americana, and the nostalgic reconstruction of his own past. He began purchasing buildings and other items for his Greenfield village project, an outdoor village, showcasing various authentic pre-industrial

American historical sites. Ford's was a strange situation: "the man who invented the future now carefully rediscovering the past" (Susman 1985: 140). Although he probably only had a small inkling of the Pandora's box he had helped open, the fact that Ford turned to the idealization of America's rural, agricultural-producer roots in his final years seemed to indicate that, like West's fictional Chief Satinpenny, he was not comfortable in the brave new world of a consumption-driven America.

West and Ford identify the same problem with 1930s American culture: its ever-growing materialism. Their understanding of the problem, however, greatly differed. As was typical of his generation, Ford still believed in the premise of the American Dream, even if its by-products sometimes troubled him—and why should he not, when his own life provided ample proof supporting the long-held national myth? On the contrary, West, born 40 years later, was like other disillusioned young American modernists, and questioned its very suppositions. This generational split is similar to the one that a scholar of the period delineated between the worldview of writers of the '20s and the writers of the '30s. Pre-Depression writers "frequently portray characters who realize their dreams of material success, but find them empty, corrupt, or otherwise unsatisfying" (Hearn 1977: 82), whereas post-Depression writers, including and especially West, "portray characters for whom the dream is completely illusory and unrealizable" (82-83). In other words, West was tremendously more critical than Ford. In his view, America's growing culture of consumption was a problem integral to the Success Dream, not accidental to it.

Their opinions on how to address the problem also widely diverged. Ford offered no real solution to it in his writings. The arch-capitalist was adamantly against any proposed political changes, in particular, any form of socialism or government-controlled industry, the institution of

which might lead to a more equitable distribution of goods, or more ideally, a decrease in the social cachet of purchasing material goods. He suggested that “The increase in the impedimenta of life only marks a stage. We are like the Indian who comes into town with all his money and buys everything he sees...Humanity is advancing out of its trinket-making stage” (Ford 1924: 268). Looking beyond the obvious stereotypes communicated in such statements, it is clear that Ford’s predictions turned out to be unduly optimistic. Since his time, America’s “trinket-making stage” has continued at full-force, if anything, expanding exponentially. The prescription suggested by West’s Satinpenny, however, is much more drastic. He tells his people: “I know that you can’t put the clock back. But there is one thing that you can do. You can stop that clock. You can smash that clock” (West [1934] 2006: 157). In short, Satinpenny advocates revolution. The scene concludes with Satinpenny and his warriors dispersing to seek vengeance on the white man, who turns out to be, once again, poor Lemuel. Satinpenny himself is allowed the honour of scalping “the poor lad” (158).

There is every indication that Satinpenny’s moral outrage may also have been West’s own, channelled through a character whose identity as a member of a subjugated people in America made him the most appropriate spokesperson for such views. In his partly biographical study of West from 1971, James Light notes that in the summer of 1933, less than a year before *A Cool Million* was published, West became an associate editor for *Americana* magazine. The surrealist-inspired publication took a cynical view of the economic crisis taking place in America and the state of the country’s cultural development in general. Its editorial stance was summed up well in its opening issue: “We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmatic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present” (quoted in Light 1971: 115). This was, of course, much in

line with West's own ultra-pessimistic views of American society, as well as the Satinpenny rhetoric.

Further evidence of such views can be found in the only known poem of West's, "Burn the Cities," published in *Contempo* magazine in early 1933. A few brief excerpts will suffice to provide a general idea of its content:

The Eastern star calls with its hundred knives

Burn the cities

Burn the cities

...London is cold

It will nurse the flame

London is tired

It will welcome the flame

London is lecherous

It will embrace the flame

London will burn (West [1933] 1997a: 458-460)

Although left-leaning in theory, like many in his circle of proletarian writer friends, West was consistently apolitical throughout his life. On one of the few instances when he was drawn into taking overt political action, the spring of 1935 on behalf of the Office Workers Union, he was assaulted by the police and locked in a cell for a short period of time. According to his chief biographer's sources, West sat disconsolately in his cell while his friends, writers including Edward Dahlberg, sported and sang, waiting out their time in custody in good spirits (Martin 1970: 259). A chastened West avoided protesting after that incident. And yet, despite his middle class distaste for involvement in the rougher side of left wing politics, his works

frequently portrayed mass uprisings and other violent, even apocalyptic images of civil unrest. *A Cool Million*, like his final novel, *The Day of the Locust*, is replete with such images.

Satinpenny's native "take back the land" revolution and Shagpoke Whipple's populist right wing one are viewed with extreme apprehension by West, even though he was almost certainly in solidarity with many of Satinpenny's views. Make no mistake, even if West fears revolution is coming, there is nothing in any of his literary works or biographical materials to suggest that revolution would ultimately be a redeeming affair. He does not venture beyond the moment of destruction to imagine the re-construction of a better world. For West, revolution is bloody, uncontrolled violence only, in which the weak and the visible minorities—like the scalped Lemuel and the murdered Jake Raven—become scapegoats for the righteous anger of an avenging mob.

In the violent conclusion of the critical Satinpenny scene, West shows that a dream based on illusions is a menacing thing. This exact message is repeated in his later novel, *The Day of the Locust*. When ardent believers finally discover that their dreams are false, they lash back in dangerous and unpredictable ways. This is always the motivation behind the Westian mobs. It is not that West fears democracy itself, as some of his most astute critics have charged (Light 1971: 167), but that he understands the depths to which a betrayed human being can sink, how unhappiness can pervert even the kindest, most benign person (see: Homer Simpson in *The Day of the Locust*). To say that he fears mob mentality is correct; to say that he fears democracy is perhaps a step too far.

The most significant lines of Satinpenny's monologue are not about revolution and destruction, but about the nature of American material "progress." After lamenting the destruction of the land and its wildlife, Satinpenny says: "In return for the loss of these things,



we accepted the white man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis and the cinema. We accepted his civilization because he himself believed in it. But now that he has begun to doubt, why should we continue to accept? His final gift to us is doubt, a soul-corroding doubt" (West [1934] 2006: 156). These are the most critical lines of the central scene of the novel, and are worthy of examination. Here we see most clearly the clashing of two competing ideologies: Satinpenny is articulating the conflict sustained throughout the narrative between the (idealized) nature-lover and the proponent of Progress. This latter individual, the agent of civilization—and not Satinpenny the archetypal noble savage—is actually the one whose actions are supported by an irrational and primitive faith. In Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda*, as previously mentioned in Chapter Two, among the four major (and in his view, flawed) sociological presuppositions of modernity identified by the author, is the idea that "history develops in endless progress" ([1962] 1973: 39).<sup>x</sup> Satinpenny rightly points to the strong element of blind faith in progress sustaining the American industrialist. In their hubris, they believe that they can build a world out of artificial materials that is better than the original, and they have tried to convince the questioning Indian of this as well.

Interestingly, as he does more markedly in *The Day of the Locust*, there is a hint of the religious in the word choice used by the author in this passage. Satinpenny is speaking of material progress in the language of spiritual doubt and faith. The Indians who had at first grudgingly accepted Western civilization because of the zeal of its proponents, are now plagued by a "soul-corroding" doubt (West [1934] 2006: 156). What is more, the proponents themselves are beginning to see that their labours have not created a better world, but a sadly depleted one. As Satinpenny then says, "He rotted this land in the name of progress, and now it is he himself who is rotting. The stench of his fear stinks in the nostrils of the great God Manitou" (156). As

all of West's works suggest, the entire edifice of the American national dream is held up, not by its vast natural resources, but by its citizens' unquestioning, semi-religious belief in the fabulous potential of their own destinies. As discussed in the next chapter in more detail, in reference to the aspiring film stars of *The Day of the Locust*, West's works frequently comment on the touching earnestness, but more often, the destructive irrationality of these beliefs. As so many have noted, Americans, for better or worse, are the legitimate offspring of the European Enlightenment and its self-empowering message of human progress. Satinpenny's lament, that the Native Americans no longer believe (if they ever did) in the guiding principles of (white) American society, sets apart the Indians from mainstream culture, indicating the privileged role West reserves for them in the novel as ethical guides. Their special burden and gift is scepticism in the idea of American progress.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The Ethical Implications of *A Cool Million***

Chief Satinpenny and his people revolted, and so did Shagpoke Whipple and his deluded followers. The book ends with no further mention of Satinpenny. As for the central character, Lemuel, he is coerced into speaking at a Shagpoke Whipple rally and assassinated. Whipple himself fares much better. His National Revolutionary Party successfully takes over the country, with him as Dictator-in-Chief, delivering the nation from "sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism" (West [1934] 2006: 179). The helpless pawn Lemuel is lauded as the party's martyr and Pitkin's Birthday becomes a national holiday. The final words of the novel are the crowd's rapturous salute to their deceased hero: "Hail Lemuel Pitkin!" and finally, "All hail, the American Boy!" (179).

The overt ethical concerns of this novel are not difficult to ascertain. West is a gloriously unsubtle writer and he is at his most unsubtle in a novel that systematically dismembers its protagonist whilst the poor fellow honestly goes about pursuing the American Dream. The social message here is never in doubt. Columbia Pictures purchased the rights to the book but never filmed it, summarizing its less-than-crowd-pleasing theme as “Honesty will buy you pain and disgrace” (quoted in Martin 1970: 245). This is certainly a major element of the *A Cool Million* ethos, but the more interesting related thematic component goes unwritten. The other target for moral outrage is found in the interstices of this ostensibly slapstick, take-no-prisoners black comedy. The answer lies in not what does happen in the novel, but in this case, what does not happen in actuality in the America of this period.

The characters embrace revolution—a solution, in West’s fable, even more horrible than the status quo. In the real world, however, Americans suffered through the Depression without a massive popular uprising. This is not to say that there was no significant popular demand for social reform or growth by organized labour. Massive general strikes began taking place in the early 1930s across the country—the largest of which was that of 325,000 textile workers in the South in 1934 (Zinn [1980] 2005: 396). The national Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which grew out of an American Federation of Labor (AFL) committee, was founded in 1935 to organize in the newer urban mass production industries (399). Roosevelt’s New Deal administration made significant reforms, for example, the establishment of a mandatory minimum wage and the Social Security Act, but as Howard Zinn notes, the basic capitalist power structure remained intact by the end of the 1930s (403).

In *The American Dream in the Great Depression*, Charles Hearn sets out to answer the question of just what happened to the American success dream in the 1930s, when this great

cultural myth was challenged by the harsh realities of the Depression (1977: ix). His conclusion is that, despite the decade's reputation for radical politics, the majority of Americans remained conservative, even in the face of economic hardships that might have caused them to question the validity of their shared social values (196). Similarly, Lawrence Levine has pointed out that one of the reasons why Americans did not revolt was their strongly ingrained culture of individual responsibility; raised on the firm belief that they possessed all the resources they needed within to achieve success, many Americans could never quite accept that sometimes external circumstances were insurmountable (1993: 214). Most clung to the success dream, to the point of delusion. The era has been described as

...preeminently an age of illusions. Traditionally given to extravagant expectations of the world, Americans demonstrated a strong tendency during the Depression crisis to cling to their expectations even if this meant ignoring or distorting objective reality. In other words, the American dream tended to become the American illusion when the reality of the Depression conditions clashed with the myth of unlimited opportunity and fabulous success. (Hearn 1977: 193)

*A Cool Million* is best known as a warning against the threat of populist Fascism, but, as usual for West, the actual target is not any one political or social system, but the false dreams that power the whole corrupted machinery. Kingsley Widmer reads the novel as an inadvertent joke on its own author: "Only a yearning innocent would confuse the shoddy fantasies of American opportunism and success with any concern for a just society and sensitive humaneness, and a meaningful future...In his outraged belief, West believed too much in his stomach-turning America" (1982: 66). This is the distinguishing mood of the novel, more than any other: hope betrayed. As the writer of the Depression era ditty "Brother, Can You Spare a

Dime?” told Studs Terkel: “In the song the man is really saying: I made an investment in this country. Where the hell are my dividends?” (quoted in Zinn [1980] 2005: 391). In a similar vein, West’s novel, below its farcical surface, is sustained by a feeling of righteous anger at the injustice of a promise unkept. Widmer is correct in his analysis here, although not everyone might necessarily feel his disdain for the implied author’s naïveté. Like so many of West’s novels, the brutality of its violence toward the central characters is in direct proportion to the implied author’s dismay at their betrayal by American cultural mythology. Lemuel’s physical dismantling is a manifestation of his spiritual dismantling, and is part of West’s ethical statement: that America is a society that promises material success without also explaining the potential cost in personal integrity accompanying it.

The early American pioneer ethos emphasized the necessity of subduing the wilderness (including the “savages” who inhabited the continent) in order to survive (Nash [1967] 2001: 24). As many Western scholars have noted, the reality of American expansion, and industrialization of the land across the continent was about more than the struggles of intrepid pioneers—it was also about the conquest of other peoples whose presence stood in the way of the growth of their own civilization (Limerick 1987: 19). This legacy of conquest still resounds in social relations in the United States today between the majority of Americans and the native peoples. In *A Cool Million*, West uses the moral legitimacy of his Indian characters, especially Chief Satinpenny, to provide a strong ethical commentary on the illusory nature of the Success Myth. This commentary is most evident in three pivotal passages, all of which contain Indian characters and all of which stand out as particularly inventive moments in a novel that has been criticized in the past for being more or less a straightforward Alger spoof. After decades of suffering from a poor critical reputation, today the novel should be regarded favourably as a

perceptive chronicling of American mythology, and as a strong ethical condemnation of the American Cult of Success.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Both Marion Meade (2010) and Robert Emmett Long (1985) provide long side-by-side comparisons of passages from West's book and the corresponding ones in Alger's books. For example, Long compares passages in *Tom Temple's Career* and *A Cool Million*. A sample from the first book is the following: "Armed with this weapon, he rushed between Mary and her pursuer, and brought down the knob with full force on the dog's back. The attention of the animal—a large bulldog—was diverted to the assailant" (quoted in Long 1985: 90). And in West's book: "Armed with the stock he had most fortunately cut, he rushed between the girl and her pursuer, and brought the knob down with full force on the dog's head. The attention of the furious animal—a large bulldog—was diverted to his assailant..." (90).

<sup>ii</sup>The question of West's political affiliations is a long debate in its own right. In a 1939 letter to the proletarian writer Jack Conroy, West defended the apolitical nature of his novels by writing that his particular satirical style unfortunately could not properly convey the "great, progressive fight" of the Leftists (quoted in Martin 1970: 336). He characterized his political role as a writer by stating "I believe that there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot" (336).

<sup>iii</sup>Published in 1925, Barton's popular book re-imagines Jesus Christ as "the founder of modern business" and "the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem" (preface; n.p.). It is a crass and facile misreading, to be sure, one comparable to describing Moses the deliverer as a skilled Human Resources manager, or the Prophet Muhammad as a PR person for God.

<sup>iv</sup>This was not the case with Henry Ford. In his typical plain-spoken fashion, Ford corrects the persistent myth of his own supposedly humble origins. In his autobiography, he writes: "There is a legend that my parents were very poor and that the early days were hard ones. Certainly they were not rich, but neither were they poor. As Michigan farmers went, we were prosperous" (1924: 22).

<sup>v</sup>Some notable articles on this topic include Daniel Walden's (1994) "Nathanael West: A Jewish Satirist in Spite of Himself (1994)," and Stacey Olster's (1988) "The 'Other' in Nathanael West's Fiction: Jewish Rejection or Jewish Projection."

<sup>vi</sup>"Satinpenny" also evokes the old Indian-head cent, which was still in circulation in West's day; this linkage might have been more authorial commentary on cultural appropriation and American materialism.

<sup>vii</sup>The only major West critic who explicitly, at least, has questioned the rhetorical competency of Satinpenny's monologue is Robert Emmett Long, who claims that it is "heavy-handed and simply fails to come off" (1985: 106).

<sup>viii</sup>On the topic of the Indian's ambivalent place in American cultural mythology, see especially, Philip J. Deloria's *Playing Indian* (1998). He defines the familiar concept, "noble savagery" as "a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and

a need to despise and dispossess them” (4). Also see Louise Barnett’s classic study of American literary depictions of Indians, *The Ignoble Savage* (1975), especially Part One, Chapter Three, describing the most commonly-held (and often contradictory) Indian stereotypes.

<sup>ix</sup>West’s dilemma as an author in this instance is similar to Bakhtin’s description of Gogol’s predicament as the author of *Dead Souls*. Bakhtin argues that the “serio-comical” genre (including satire), unlike the epic, places the author and their described novelistic world on the same temporal plane ([1981] 2006: 27). As a result, novelistic discourse becomes conventionalized; the situations portrayed are familiar, at close-hand, objects of amusement. This is why, having written a novel, *Dead Souls*, that was considered to be an amusing satire, Gogol was frustrated in his original aim to write a serious second part of his proposed trilogy, outlining social reform. This is one plausible explanation for why Satinpenny’s speech is unsuccessful rhetorically—it is a moment of only partially-digested seriousness in an otherwise satirical novel.

<sup>x</sup>The other three presuppositions Ellul believes are tacitly agreed upon by the majority of people living in the modern world are that the human aim in life is happiness, that humans are naturally good, and that everything is matter ([1962] 1973: 39).



## Chapter Four

### Spiritual Longing in *The Day of the Locust*

“I was to a show oncet that was me, an’ more’n me; an’ my life, an’ more’n my life, so ever’thing was bigger.”

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

“...she said that any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn’t be choosers.”

—Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

Published only a year before his premature death in 1940, Nathanael West’s novel, *The Day of the Locust* is his best known work today. It was also almost certainly the author’s favourite among his published works (Martin 1970: 303). Although it is fair to say that the majority of critics still prefer his brutally heartfelt second novel on the topic of theodicy, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to *Locust*, the latter work tends to resonate more today with contemporary audiences due to its precocious understanding of American mass culture. As one critic notes, “It would be difficult to find a work of American fiction more plainly resonant with Adorno’s culture industry thesis than *The Day of the Locust*” (Roberts 1995: 61). In the 1970s, it was made into a strangely emotionally flat film directed by John Schlesinger (best known for *Midnight Cowboy*), featuring Donald Sutherland as Homer Simpson.<sup>i</sup> Some 70 years after its initial publication, it is regarded by many as the Hollywood novel *par excellence*, mentioned in such company as Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Budd Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1978 [1941]), and Waugh’s *The Loved One* (1948).

Nominally, *Locust* is the story of the young artist Tod Hackett, the Hollywood genre’s archetypal Easterner who has followed his dreams west, this time to work as a set designer in

Los Angeles. There he lives on the margins of Hollywood society, befriended by a motley group of misfits, including an aspiring actress, his love interest; her father, a failed vaudevillian; a pugnacious dwarf; an assorted sampling of unemployed set extras; and the sun-seeking Midwesterners who have, in West's words "come to California to die" (West [1939] 2009: 60). When discussing the novel, critics typically focus on its central subject: the agony of false dreams, or alternately, worthy dreams left unfulfilled, in a spiritually bereft modern American society. Regardless of where one pins the blame here—a politically and commercially constructed social reality, individual character flaws, or even an impersonal fate—W.H. Auden, Rita Barnard, and the many other scholars who have chosen to concentrate on the topic are correct in noting that wishing and dreaming occupy West's characters in a way that is pathological.

My own focus is somewhat different from these critics. I view the novel's subject, the depiction of pathological dreaming, as the implied author's moral commentary on the degraded state of American spiritual life. His characters *must* dream, as a psychological defense, or despair. I propose that *The Day of Locust* is, fundamentally, not just a work indicting the cruelty and vapidness of American mass culture in the 1930s (although it certainly is that too), but a novel about the spiritual longing of so many individuals within American society, misdirected at unworthy objects of adulation. It might properly be called a highly religious novel, in that its true focus is not Hollywood at all, but Hollywood used as a replacement for religion. West's novel suggests—nay, forcefully states—that the entire vast Hollywood dream industry is created and maintained as a result of the American public's pressing need to find spiritual succor in modern life. Hollywood in *Locust* is used, as it is frequently in American novels, as a symbol of America's social decay. In West's novel it also serves as a sometimes compelling, if

ultimately unfulfilling, American secular religion, a substitute for a more meaningful understanding of life.

“Spiritual longing”—along with spiritual need, and other similar variant terms used repeatedly in this chapter—is symptomatic of the persistent religious impulse among individuals, as studied in the field of philosophy of religion. As mentioned in the previous chapter, West cites William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] 2002) as an influence on *Miss Lonelyhearts*, so it is doubly appropriate to turn to the classic multidisciplinary work of psychology and religious studies in order to define this term as used here. In his study, James, one of the fathers of American Pragmatism, is uninterested in discussing religion in terms of the objective “truth” of certain religious beliefs; instead, he focuses on the common psychological motivations behind many religions, expressing themselves in a variety of ways. James does not tackle metaphysical questions (does God exist?, etc.); his discussion of religion treats it as a usable human good, existing as a moral support to help individuals reconcile themselves to the vicissitudes of life. In his conclusion, he states that the psychological nucleus behind all religions consists of two elements: an uneasiness with ourselves as we currently are—this is sometimes expressed as a feeling of incompleteness—and the search for a solution outside ourselves (552). He theorizes that the religious individual commonly believes that a small, germinal part of his or herself needs to connect to a related externality, or as James explains adequately, if inelegantly: “*He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck*” (552; original italics and capitalization). For our purposes

then, paraphrasing James, spiritual longing can be defined as a metaphysical reaching outside the self, growing out of an embryonic inner quality, toward union with some greater external reality.

*Miss Lonelyhearts* is self-evidently a novel that deals with both spiritual and religious matters, in particular, the question of whether Christianity can still provide meaning and solace to its adherents in the modern world.<sup>ii</sup> The religious nature of West's fourth and final novel, however, is rarely commented upon, or if it is, only in passing. As will be discussed in more detail presently, the author's early title ideas, and his final selection, attest to this claim. Its original title, *The Cheated* (Meade 2010: 237), supports the idea that West's characters are the victims of a universal bait-and-switch scheme. All of them travelled to California for emotional and spiritual fulfillment, under various guises. This fulfillment was tacitly promised to them by Jacques Ellul's "sociological propaganda" ([1962] 1973: 62) of American culture. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, sociological propaganda is not nefariously and strategically directed at individuals from one source; it grows organically out of the technological society and seeks to incorporate the individual into the collective. Sociological propaganda in *Locust* includes a whole host of influences, most critically in this chapter, the mass media's depiction of Hollywood as a glamorous paradise.

None of West's characters find what they are seeking in California. All are betrayed. The novel's obvious interest in the topic of artificiality is also related to its ultimate theme of misplaced spiritual longing. The artificiality theme is signaled through both its descriptions of the physical landscape and the behaviour of its characters. Examples of the former include the Hollywood film sets, and of the latter, actress Faye Greener's studied poses and the child actor Adore Loomis's disturbing displays of mimicked adult sexuality. All such things are poor substitutions emulating some imagined idealized reality, just as the landscape of Los Angeles

represents its naïve residents' attempts to replicate someone's idea of utopia. Tod Hackett's interest in the numerous cultists of Los Angeles also has spiritual significance, as does the important final scene, often viewed by critics as socially revolutionary, or apocalyptic in nature. It also has elements of religious ecstasy, of the Bacchic orgy.

Two major streams of theoretical influence inform this discussion. The first derives from theorists of material culture. Taking my inspiration from Benjamin and Jameson, as well as Baudrillard's (1988) conceptualization of America as an ironic "achieved utopia," I will explore what cultural artifacts communicate about the aspirations and longings of the American people as depicted in West's novel. Some of the most culturally insightful passages are those describing garish Los Angeles architecture and the spectacular flim-flammy of set design in the back-lots. The three theorists, different though they may be (particularly Baudrillard, who is not usually grouped together with the two other Marxist-influenced philosophers), provide insights into the utopian nature of the late-capitalist landscape, viewing the contemporary urban environment as the public's dreamscape. All three regarded material culture, as it has been stated of Benjamin, as a "spatial model of the self" (Buse et al. 2005: 52). West's Hollywood, explicitly presented as the physical manifestation of human dreams, is one of the best American literary examples of some of the ideas of these cultural theorists.

Somewhat more obliquely, the second stream of influence informing this discussion—like all of this dissertation—comes from the renewed twentieth and twenty-first century tradition of ethical criticism as practiced by Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Daniel Schwarz, and others, which views literature as an excellent testing-ground for weighing ethical decisions relevant to our real lives. Schwarz's work continually asserts that there is a "continuity between reading texts and reading lives" (2001: 9). As previously mentioned, all three of these critics,

especially Nussbaum, are to some degree interested in breaking down what they view as an artificial disciplinary boundary between philosophy and literature. In fact, as Aristotelians, they believe in the unity of philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, and tend to view literature as a way of *specifying and dramatizing* philosophical principles for human consideration. This does not mean that they devalue literature by any means; it is not philosophy's handmaid, it is its partner. These humanist critics value literature's unique artistic capacity for eliciting emotion, creating immediacy, and prompting sustained contemplation from the reader in a way that philosophical texts—and oftentimes, even actual life experiences—do not. They believe that literature is basically mimetic, but not that it is simply a mirror-image of “real life.” Instead, they tend to mean something like Richard Kearney's alternate definition of Aristotle's mimesis: “a creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold” (2002: 12). In short, they view literature as a third space, between absolute reality and absolute fantasy, created by humans for humans.<sup>iii</sup> Its greatest virtue is that it provides the means for a total imaginative immersion in another realm.

My own approach to ethical criticism is less strident than that of some contemporary ethical critics. John Gardner might be used as an extreme example of this, going so far as to state that “true art is moral” ([1979] 2000: 5). I make no attempt to evaluate literature according to my own subjective (if potentially rhetorically defensible) moral beliefs. Nor do I believe that the canon is the expression of unchanging eternal verities. These are some of the many charges laid against ethical critics—a designation that actually fits many, but that few are willing to take on. Instead, my own version of ethical criticism is based on a question Wayne Booth asks, “Can you and I, talking together about this story, find ethically productive life together?” (2001a: 100). From this perspective, the novel is an object of moral contemplation. I take for granted that it

almost always contains discernible ethical themes, even if critics might not agree on what those themes are. Most importantly, I believe that discussion of those themes is a worthwhile intellectual and, frequently, moral activity for readers.

Proceeding from these premises, part of my examination of *Locust* pays attention to the ethical themes it dramatizes, one being the perennial philosophical question of what desires are worth having, or in other words, what aims help form the basis of a meaningful life. In the first section I will re-examine one of the major critical debates surrounding the novel: how to best understand its obvious motif of dream-making, beginning with the central piece of criticism from Auden and then the later responses challenging his understanding of the work. I will explain how my own perspective converges with and diverges from these arguments, and that, most importantly, the compulsive dreaming in this novel should be viewed as the author's sensitive and insightful observation that human spiritual need in modern life is so great that it finds unusual channels for expression. Faye Greener and Abe Kusich will be analyzed as West's examples of the arch-dreamer and the arch-realist, along with the consequences of being each.

In the second part, drawing on relevant cultural theory, I will discuss the novel's depiction of Southern California and Hollywood as the physical manifestations of such dreams, and how West uses his descriptions of its garish and grotesque environment to communicate the emotional and spiritual disorder in American culture. Finally, before concluding, in the third section I will analyze the novel's use of religious language, motifs, and imagery to convey West's idea that Hollywood exists to fill the spiritual void in modern American life—that its primary function is to serve as the public's emotional outlet. All of these threads of discussion support one central idea regarding the philosophical content of *The Day of the Locust*: that it can best be understood as a sustained exploration of a quintessentially modern and American type of

spiritual longing, the longing that naturally arises from a democratic-utopian culture that dares make the outrageous promise that all wishes can be granted, and all desires can be fulfilled. The ethics or particular moral philosophy of *Locust* is that material realizations of dreams do nothing to quench spiritual desires. They are, at best, a harmless outlet for spiritual frustration, and more often, at worst, a solution more emotionally and socially destructive than the original problem.

## **I. The Kingdom of Dreams**

One of the most oft-cited pieces of West criticism was written by W.H. Auden originally in *The Dyer's Hand* in the 1960s. In it the poet-critic states that West's works should be classified as "Cautionary Tales" (1971: 149), moral allegories, not novels in the conventional sense, with complex characters and well-developed, plot-driven narratives. Most significantly, Auden makes the claim that all of West's characters suffer from a spiritual sickness that he names "West's Disease." According to Auden, West's Disease is a sickness arising from the inability to transform wishes into desires (149). (Although this begs the unstated question of why, for that matter, it would be preferable to have unfulfilled desires rather than unfulfilled wishes.) For him, a wish is a passing fancy, a whim, whereas a desire is based on an actual pressing need or firm conviction. "All wishes," he writes, "whatever their apparent content, have the same unvarying meaning: 'I refuse to be what I am'" (150). West's wishers are wracked by acute self-pity and self-hatred, and refuse to take responsibility for their own shortcomings. Auden goes on to theorize that West's Disease is much more prevalent in a modern, industrialized democratic society. He is no doubt tacitly referring to the United States when he states that societies with a greater equality of opportunity also reveal the inequalities of character and ability among their citizens (153). Failure to achieve one's goals in such a society is much



more bitter than it would be in a feudal one, where one's social status and potential achievements are more or less circumscribed at birth.

The general tenor of the piece is faintly evocative of both Jamesonian cultural theory and McLuhan's communications theory. Presciently, Auden states that in societies where opportunities for entertainment are constant, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between a wish and a desire. He uses the example of the pre-sound-recording age, in which those who loved music would have to wait months and walk miles to hear it. Now, should the fancy arise, listeners can hear music at the flip of a switch (or today, the click of an icon). Auden asks an interesting question: now that our wishes can be gratified instantly by modern technology, how do we know that we truly desire them, and are not merely trying to forget ourselves? (153). Auden implies that the latter is true in the case of West's dreamers and the larger superficial, celebrity-obsessed society that they represent.

As thought provoking as it is, one of the challenges of applying Auden's distinct definitions of wishes versus desires to West's novel is that West himself tended to use neither of these terms when discussing his character's delusions. His term of choice, in both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* was fairly consistently "dreams" (in the latter work, see West [1939] 2009: 76, 101, 104-106, 132), and once, "illusions," as in the Claude Estee house party scene, when a minor character complains that Tod and the others, "just won't let me cherish my illusions" (71). Definitions of "dream" vary, from a strongly desired goal, making it similar to Auden's definition of desire, to the nebulous thoughts experienced during sleep. West's use of this term is ambivalent, making Auden's analysis a form of educated guesswork, at best. Furthermore, I would argue, from a pragmatist's perspective, that it really does not matter, in West's universe, whether his characters' dreams are only, ultimately, passing whims or actual

desperate needs; what matters is that they are convinced of the significance of their dreams—an important point that Auden’s critique does not take into account. They do act as if their dreams are based on firm convictions. In light of this, it should be noted that this chapter’s use of the three sometimes synonymous terms, wishes, desires, and dreams, is not according to Auden’s idiosyncratic definitions. (Echoing West, I tend to use “dreams” most often in this chapter, when referring specifically to his characters’ desires/wishes/delusions.)

Auden’s semi-sociological view is supported, at least in part, by American historians. Social historians of the 1920s and ‘30s claim that one of the effects of the development of efficient, transnational communication networks, and quicker transportation in the years following the First World War, was to essentially standardize culture (Kyvig 2002: 187-188). The explosion of growth in the advertising and film industries also played a major part in this standardization. Regional differences became less pronounced, and a more uniform national culture began to emerge. David Kyvig claims that one characteristic of American culture during this period was the beginning of a widespread societal belief in instant, accessible gratification for everyone. He writes that “Acceptance of the social, economic, and material limitations of the immediate family and community environment in which one lived became less commonplace than in earlier eras. Americans were encouraged to believe that bounties lay at hand to be consumed and enjoyed” (188). In other words, desires that might otherwise have gone unarticulated, or lain dormant, were given shape by the newly expanded mass media. Advertisements and the movies gave Americans access to a whole new world of “glamour” that they had not realized previously that they were missing in their own lives.

Durkheim expressed views similar to Auden’s about inflamed desires in an advanced capitalist society as early as the late nineteenth century. In his pioneering sociological study

*Suicide* ([1897] 1951), Durkheim identifies four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. The third type of suicide is characteristic of the modern industrialized Western society. As he explains, for societies to be stable, all citizens must believe that they have their fair share of the common good. When people stop believing in this they feel cheated, they despair, and the number of suicides rises. Cherished social values no longer make sense (an American example: thrift and hard work may not yield prosperity), and the individual's needs and expectations are mismatched with the social reality. This often happens in times of political chaos or economic disaster. Alternately, it can also happen during times of economic prosperity, for as Durkheim notes, increased prosperity also increases human desire (253). The growth of industry in the modern world has the effect of actually increasing suicides, because when surrounded by wealth which *seems* readily available to all, people's aspirations run wild. What follows for the vast majority is, inevitably, disappointment.

It is normal for the individual in such a society to become angry when their personal circumstances do not match their expectations. Durkheim describes the state of the individual in an anomic society, in terms which can be appropriately applied to the characters of *Locust*:

Reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations; reality is therefore abandoned, but so too is possibility abandoned when it in turn becomes reality. A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known. Henceforth one has no strength to endure the least reverse. The whole fever subsides and the sterility of all the tumult is apparent, and it is seen that all these new sensations in their infinite quantity cannot form a solid foundation of happiness to support one during days of trial. ([1897] 1951: 256)

This description fits West's "cheated" in several regards. First of all, they do not appreciate their current reality—it is viewed as merely the jumping-off point to eventual success. Faye sees herself not as a young extra among thousands of others, but as the chrysalis of a celebrated actress. Her father, despite his day job as a polish salesman, "...isn't really a peddler," but an actor (West [1939] 2009: 98), according to Faye. Similarly, Maybelle Loomis, the pushy stage-mother in the novel, is adamant that her son, the unpleasant and unchildlike Adore is on the road to stardom. ("What's Shirley Temple got that he ain't got?" [138].) Presumably, as so many of the star biographies tell their readers, even if these characters someday achieve fame it will not fulfill them. So too with the Midwesterners who have travelled to their Promised Land of California. West portrays them as disappointed and bored, continually seeking new stimulations and diversions. Their boredom even makes them ghoulish. At Harry Greener's funeral, Tod spies a small number of uninvited guests attending in hopes of witnessing some dramatic mourning scene. They are described as possessing "an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence" (127-128). They have nothing better to do than attend the funeral of a man they do not know.

From a Marxist perspective, Durkheim's detailed functionalist study of the anomic society and Auden's piece of literary criticism discussing American democracy are both apolitical in that they do not analyze the structural factors undergirding the societies they describe, only the actions of the people within them. This is one of the chief objections to Auden's criticism of the novel which has emerged in more recent years. In a 1994 essay linking West's theory of wishing with a theory of mass culture, Rita Barnard writes that West's major contribution to Depression era literature's social criticism was his understanding of the significance of the collective's wishes (325), which expressed themselves through the

commodification of culture into something easily digestible and salable. Barnard does not believe that West is an advocate for high art's redemptive qualities either, as did Eliot, Pound and company. Instead she perceptively states that for West mass culture indicates a sign of need (343), and by this, given the rest of her essay, it is understood that she actually means political need. Her dispute with Auden arises chiefly from his belief that the content of the Westian wish is "I refuse to be what I am." It should instead be, according to Barnard, "things are not as they should be" (343). The real culprit, she argues, is not the dysfunctional psychology of West's characters, but the corrupting nature of consumer culture, which creates artificial needs for commercial products through the advertising industry.

As Barnard rightly notes, this reformulation shifts the debate from the psychological to the political. Given the paucity of textual evidence, she cannot quite argue in favour of West's novel offering a revolutionary solution; she does state that the apocalyptic finale to *Locust* seems to imply a new beginning. My own perspective moves away from Barnard's political focus and Auden's psychological (and socially conservative) one to the question of *Locust* as illustrative of the implied author's own guiding moral philosophy, and also, how contemplating and discussing this philosophy helps us as readers and human beings in the wider world firm up the rationales behind our own sets of values. In my view, *Locust* makes the point that American life is empty, and its citizens spiritually famished, in the Jamesian sense, meaning that they are searching for, and not finding, something outside of themselves, yet connected to themselves, to give their everyday lives meaning, and to comfort them in times of distress by helping them rationalize their misfortunes as temporary and part of some greater plan. Traditionally, these have been the functions of religion, which, as James writes, "*thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary*" ([1902] 2002: 59; original italics). By design or otherwise, West's novel takes the

role of religion and transfers it to the American film-making industry: it provides meaning and consistency in the sorrowful lives of West's characters. It also gives hope for characters like Faye and the other would-be film stars of the novel, who can view their current imperfect lives within the established Hollywood narrative of "struggling actor finally makes good." In opposition to Barnard's claim that West's portrayal of a debased mass culture indicates political need among America's citizens, I would argue that a more accurate reading of the novel's content is that it is more indicative of intense spiritual need instead.

My chief concern with Auden's theorizing is that he does not treat the dreams of West's characters with sufficient seriousness, which is not true to the spirit of the novel. West took his characters' dreams—foolish though they may have been—extremely seriously, as the symptoms of great internal suffering. This is in large part why the ethos of this particular novel is so humane. Instead, Auden implies that West's dreamers have frivolous wishes and bring their sufferings on themselves. To Auden, they are immature children crying out for a treat. Barnard does treat their dreams with respect, viewing them as symptoms of political neediness. Her reading is a valid one, but as discussed previously in this dissertation, it is not in line with West or his most perceptive critics' understanding of his works. Although his works can be read politically, West was more of a philosopher than a political activist. *Locust* portrays the sorrow and rage that follow in the wake of frustrated dreams. One must seriously twist—or creatively reinterpret, shall we say—his content to make the argument that *Locust* is primarily a political novel about material culture run amok in America. Leslie Fiedler even makes the claim that West's writing was intentionally apolitical, that the author refused to tailor his fiction to serve the aims of a social program, placing him at odds with so many of his proletarian and proletarian-influenced peers of the 1930s (Michael Gold, Robert Cantwell, and Edward Dahlberg, to name

just a few). Fiedler views him as a fundamentally honest writer, “rendering the naked anguish he felt, rather than projecting the commitment to action and faith it was assumed he should feel” ([1960] 1992: 485-486).

Dreaming, instead, is the novel’s subject of exploration. Most of the novel’s characters are unfulfilled dreamers, invested in their own fantasy worlds, and deeply unhappy with the lives they are currently living. Tod Hackett, Homer Simpson, and Earle Shoop are tortured by their unrequited love for the same woman. Earle is also a rarely-employed film extra in Westerns. Homer, a puzzling character—at various moments he is portrayed as an earnest child, a profoundly autistic man, and a sociopath—has long lived an emotionally unsatisfying life as a bookkeeper in Wayneville, Iowa.<sup>iv</sup> His flat characterization can be explained by the fact that his function is more representative than individual: he is Tod (and West’s) prototypical Midwesterner who has travelled to California in search of, ultimately, a more meaningful life. Harry Greener is a failed vaudeville comic actor turned shoeshine salesman by financial necessity. The aforementioned Maybelle Loomis is a stage mother living vicariously through her young son.

Faye Greener, the object of so many of the other characters’ desires, is herself entirely under the enchantment of her own dreams of film stardom. Faye is a fascinating (and fascinated) character, much more compelling than the actual protagonist, Tod, whom a number of scholars have compared to Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway (Long 1985: 140-141, Meade 2010: 239, Ames 2007: 56), usually noting that both serve as relatively colourless observers of the surrounding drama. Critics are divided on Faye’s role in the work. Victor Comerchero claims she represents “the born dreamer in society” (1964: 136), and that, among all the novel’s characters, exhibits the most healthy sexuality (141). Among West scholars of the 1960s and ‘70s, Comerchero is

perhaps the most balanced in his appraisal of Faye. Most regard her as either a living symbol of Hollywood's superficiality and depravity, or at best, a helpless rube seduced by the film industry. There is also the "Madonna/whore" school of critics, including Randall Reid and Leslie Fiedler, who indict Faye as the beckoning siren leading otherwise sane men to destruction. Indeed, Fiedler's reading of Faye in *Love and Death in the American Novel* has become something of a classic. He places Faye within his taxonomy of American female literary types as "the blonde bitch in all her archetypal purity" ([1960] 1992: 327), the culmination in his series of characterizations: Charlotte Temple to Temple Drake, Daisy Miller to Daisy Fay, then Faye Greener (326). The central fact about Faye for Fiedler is her delicious unattainability. For him, Tod is the subject and Faye is only the object upon which his desire focuses.

From the 1990s onward, younger, mainly female critics began to question these earlier readings of Faye. Susan Edmunds refuses to regard Faye as a fool or a symbol of Hollywood's destructiveness. Instead, she reads the novel as a tale of two conflicting types of artists and tastes: Tod is the representative modernist and proponent of "high" art (white, male, middle-class, educated), and Faye is the representative rebellious proponent of mass culture and popular forms of art (female, lower-class, uneducated) (Edmunds 1998: 307). Geneva Gano also reads Faye's character in a new light. In her essay on *Locust* as a satire of nationalistic New Deal regionalist writing, Gano takes exception to Fiedler and company "siding with Tod to peg Faye for a 'bitch'" (2009: 58), and claims that Tod's misogyny can be understood as the regionalist's nostalgia for earlier, more restrictive gender roles for women (59).

My own understanding of Faye has more in common with Comerchero's than it does the reductive, arguably misogynist Fiedler portrait, or the feminist readings supplied by Gano and Edmunds. My major objection to the latter two scholars' readings of this character is that they



stray too far from the original text in order to fit Faye's function in the novel into their paradigms of choice. It is one thing to regard a novel from a fresh new perspective—it is quite another to grossly exaggerate carefully selected elements to suit one's own idiosyncratic thesis. For example, at several junctures Edmunds mentions Tod's mother, "Mrs. Hackett," (who is never mentioned in the novel by that name) as an example of an earlier female ideal in opposition to Faye, who she claims is representative of the modern woman and the "body beautiful." Edmunds writes: "A chaste and musical Victorian homemaker, Mrs. Hackett functions in West's text as the purest exemplar of pure taste. Infusing the genteel domestic world in which she raises her son with a sacred respect for high art, she places Tod on a class-specific cultural trajectory, etc..." (1998: 308). These details are a curious embroidery on the actual text, as Tod's mother is only referred to once in passing by the author, when Tod recognizes a Bach chorale at a funeral as a piece she used to play on the piano when he was a boy (West [1939] 2009: 128). Based on this slight reference, Edmunds has extrapolated an entire detailed back-story for this non-existent character. Her claims that Tod represents high culture are also extremely problematic, but suffice to say for our purposes, Edmunds' and Gano's readings of Faye and Faye's role are overall not sufficiently grounded in the text to be plausible.

Fiedler's reading, on the other hand, is basically accurate—Faye is undeniably portrayed as irresistible and seemingly indestructible, described as being "like a cork" bouncing along merrily over rough seas (West [1939] 2009: 173). It is, however, partial. West often presents Tod's disturbing sexual obsession with Faye ("If only he had the courage to throw himself on her. Nothing less violent than rape would do" [107]), but contrary to Fiedler's presentation of the character, she is not portrayed by West solely as some rampaging sex kitten. The author also devotes a number of passages to descriptions of Faye's psychological motivations, her hopes and

dreams. Her sexuality is by no means the most interesting thing about her in the novel. As Comerchero suggests, Faye's constant romanticizing is likely a defensive response to the emotionally impoverished environment in which she lives (1964: 140). If there is a type which it might be said Faye represents, it would be more true to West's portrayal to categorize her as yet another betrayed dreamer, not a Blonde Bitch.

Faye is actually portrayed quite sympathetically by West. Tod's rape fantasies reflect on himself, not her.<sup>v</sup> They do not necessarily prove that she is a coldblooded seductress. They reflect Tod's own status as one of the frustrated dreamers—rape, after all, has little to do with sex and a great deal to do with power. Tod's dreams of possessing Faye are symbolic of his powerlessness to realize his goals in an anomic society. In the context of this novel, they have the same meaning as Faye's compulsive dream of stardom. In a general way, as Victor Comerchero proposes, aberrant sexuality has a function in West's *Locust* similar to that of many of Eliot's works: to dramatically symbolize the failure of modern society to provide some spiritual or emotional outlet to individuals (1964: 142).

Furthermore, many of Faye's least pleasant personality traits are blamed in the novel on her naïve copying of the behaviour of other film stars. She is, after all, only seventeen years old—one can hardly expect her to be a mature, self-actualized person. Her artificiality and supercilious airs are not due to some fundamental falseness of nature. Faye acts in this ridiculous manner in imitation of those she admires and hopes to become. Her artificiality is actually an act of anxiety and longing. West writes, "She was an actress who learned from bad models in a bad school" (West [1939] 2009: 104). This is especially clear in the scene in which Faye rather pathetically uses her sex appeal to charm Claude Estee, who she perceives as being able to help advance her career. Much has been made by critics of her obvious attempts at

seduction in this scene, as if somehow Faye the teenaged film extra holds the balance of power in her encounter with the well-connected and experienced screenwriter. In reality, power relations are being negotiated in this scene: Faye is trading her sexual power for Claude's much more substantial political power. The most significant part of their interview is Faye's long, glib recitation of acting clichés to impress Claude: "I don't believe in luck. Luck is just hard work, they say, and I'm willing to work as hard as anybody" (158). The scene is usually read as a seduction, but it is every bit as obviously a job interview between a desperate candidate and a much more sanguine employer. West's portrayal of Faye as earnest aspirant is touching, not chilling.

Marion Meade's recent joint-biography on West and Eileen McKenney, *Lonelyhearts*, hypothesizes that Faye is actually, if not West's avatar, at least the character from all the works most similar to its author (2010: 239). Both West and Faye, argues Meade, were vulnerable believers in their own dreams. Meade's biography is more popular than scholarly, so she does not spend a great deal of time elaborating on this claim, which is a fascinating one. It is possible to view Faye as representing certain aspects of West's personality. His works typically balance between cynicism and sentiment, with characters as representatives of both extremes. On the one hand, his own attitude toward the industry in which he worked was tough-minded and practical.<sup>vi</sup> His views would have aligned him closely with the Claude Estee character, the successful, jaded screenwriter who is Tod's mentor. On the other hand, although he had no illusions about Hollywood's money-making modus operandi, he still viewed with sympathy the innocents who believed in its beauty and glamour, like Faye, understanding their attraction to the dream factory.

In a letter to Edmund Wilson written during his last years as a screenwriter in Hollywood, West describes a story conference he attended. West quotes the unnamed producer, who is hesitant to invest half a million dollars in West's (comparatively, no doubt) highbrow proposed project: "...it isn't funny enough to make them piss their seats—it isn't sad enough to make them snuffle, and there's no message for them to carry away. Go back and put a message in it" (quoted in West 1997: 793-794). West does not present this anecdote as one would expect from a member of the Eastern literary "elite" in Hollywood: he does not criticize the producer for making him write commercially viable scripts with pat, easy-to-understand moral messages. Instead, West seems to be using this anecdote to in a self-critical way, to explain why his own works are failures—because they appeal to no one and are impossible to categorize. As one critic puts it, West writes in the same letter, his works consist of his own "private and unfunny jokes" (793). Within the context of the letter, West's use of the producer's quotation implies that he agrees, to some extent, that he is at fault for not making his works accessible to the common reader (or spectator). Nonetheless, he recognizes that he is simply incapable of adapting his unique style to the demands of the mainstream cultural consumer. Unlike Thomas Wolfe, to whom he compares himself unfavorably, he does not go in for "the broad sweep, the big canvas, the shot-gun adjectives, the important people, [etc...]" (793).

In this letter, as conveyed in *The Day of the Locust* as a whole, the author communicates the belief that many individuals in American society have a pressing need for some escape from their emotionally arid lives. From this perspective, writing novels or film scripts that entertain or otherwise stimulate, with clear "messages" to the reader/viewer is an act of humanity. Anything that distracts them from the feeling that their lives are emotionally or intellectually unsatisfying, is welcome. In a conversation with Claude Estee, Tod mentions his romantic woes, cynically

comparing love to a vending machine, and pursuing Faye like carrying a heavy, uncomfortable suitcase. The two also jest rhetorically about whether Tod's metaphors for love could be incorporated into a script. Claude tells his young protégé, "You've got to remember your audience. What about the barber in Purdue? He's been cutting hair all day and he's tired. He doesn't want to see some dope carrying a valise or fooling with a nickel machine. What the barber wants is amour and glamor" (West [1939] 2009: 72). Claude's statements reveal him to be a savvy businessperson and someone with an understanding of human nature. He is not quite saying that average cultural consumer is incapable of understanding artistic cinema; instead, he is saying that tired men and women prefer to be entertained.

Some interesting value judgments from the implied author are also on display here, indicating why *Locust* is more than a cultural critique. West is indeed criticizing the triviality and superficiality of the film industry throughout much of the novel. He is also sympathetic to the reality that Hollywood exists to fill a human need. This latter point is more important to our ethical understanding of the novel than any other. According to West, Hollywood is not a social ill itself; more accurately, the presence of Hollywood is the strongest symptom of some grave illness at the core of American culture. The guiding idea at play is that American lives are not worth living as they are, and that we should be gentle with dreamers who need their illusions in order to survive. West's novel is a sympathetic examination of the spiritual lives of America's dreamers.

If this is the case, Faye is the most significant of the characters who populate *Locust*. Her tendency to day-dream is the most pronounced of them all, indicating that she is the one with the strongest need to believe in forces outside herself ultimately easing her personal discontent. Upon meeting Homer for the first time, she informs him that she will one day be a star. "It's my

life,” she says, “It’s the only thing in the whole world that I want” and “If I’m not, I’ll commit suicide” (West [1939] 2009: 98). Like her father Harry, the old vaudevillian, Faye’s acting extends beyond the stage or movie set. Most of her life is, in fact, an elaborate pantomime. Her act is, at various moments, cloying, ridiculous, and touching. Harry and Faye’s joint act takes a turn for the grotesque in the same scene. Homer observes Faye emoting over Harry’s sick-bed (actually, Homer’s sofa). Her melodramatic sorrow—either for Homer’s benefit, or simply because she wants to take advantage of the dramatic potential of the moment—infuriates Harry. To punish her, he gives his trademark hideous stage laugh, which he cannot stop. She retaliates by singing “Jeepers Creepers.” The strange show goes on for a bewildered Homer until Faye quiets her sick father by punching him in the mouth. The daughter and father’s behaviour is uncontrolled, over-emotional—in short, bordering on hysteria. It is West’s statement on the dangers of artistic role-playing bleeding into everyday life, a theme which also dominates his first work, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*.

The most powerful of the Faye scenes, and the one that does the most to humanize an often unlikeable character, comes in Chapter Thirteen, where Tod muses on one of her defining characteristics, her capacity for dreaming. Faye tells him that she spends long periods of time making up fanciful stories, which she suggests they turn into film treatments and sell to the pictures. They are all banal enough. Tod listens indulgently, touched by her seriousness. West uses the metaphor of thumbing through a pack of cards to describe Faye’s proclivity for picking a daydream at random to imagine. She intimates to Tod, if not in so many words, that “any dream is better than no dream and beggars couldn’t be choosers” (West [1939] 2009: 104). This rather pathetic sentiment reveals the desperate lack of meaning in her daily life. She clings to the daydreams in order to add some romantic colour to her ordinary world. Passages like this one

lend support to the idea that Faye is intended to serve as a compulsive daydreamer for West, not as Fiedler paints her, almost solely as a femme fatale. She is ruthless and coldblooded only in pursuit of the dream to which she is in thrall.

If Faye serves as the arch-dreamer in a novel of dreamers, the most pathologically self-deceiving of Tod's coterie, her counterpart, West's single comparatively emotionally sound character, is worth describing as well. "Honest Abe Kusich" (West [1939] 2009: 62), was modeled after a real little person who sold papers on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Wilcox Street for many years (Martin 1970: 306). Abe makes his first ignominious appearance in the novel emerging from a bundled pile of blankets in the hallway of Tod's apartment building, the San Bernardino Arms. He is seemingly naked. As Tod observes, openmouthed, a woman launches Abe's clothing into the hallway, cursing. This immediately establishes Abe as the comic butt of jokes, struggling to maintain his dignity in a world where his appearance as a hydrocephalic dwarf undermines him as a person in the eyes of others. This idea is repeated continually throughout the novel. Unlike Harry Greener, Faye's father, who compulsively plays the fool in large part as an act of survival ("...but now he clowned continuously. It was his sole method of defense. Most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown." [77]), Abe is a figure of fun against his will. He takes himself very seriously, erupting into rage when he suspects his integrity is being mocked or questioned.

West's descriptions of Abe seem calculated to arouse pity. His anger is usually impotent. Goaded to anger by Earle Shoop in one scene, Tod catches him by the collar to prevent him from attacking. Instead of trying to get loose, he leans forward "like a terrier in a harness, and wagged his great head from side to side" (West [1939] 2009: 150). The most poignant scene involving Abe is at the impromptu party following the cock-fight. When Earle denies him a chance to cut-

in on his dance with Faye, it provokes physical violence at last between the two. Instead of condescending to fight him, Earle just tries to repel him. Miguel becomes involved. He “dashed him against the wall like a man killing a rabbit against a tree” (164). Through Tod and Claude’s interventions, an unconscious Abe is pulled away to safety. The way Miguel and Earle treat the (admittedly over-excited and annoying) Abe is heartbreaking, not so much because of their physical violence, but because of their smirking disregard for his humanity. His desire to dance with Faye—an acknowledgement of his personhood, after the others have danced with her—is ignored or disregarded by everyone present.

Many critics have mentioned in passing that Abe is one of the most humane characters in *Locust*, standing out in stark contrast to most of the others. James Light writes that he is the most compassionately portrayed of the characters in *Locust* (1971: 159). Although he is loud, vulgar, violent and instinctually rude, he is also honest, full of vitality, and principled in his own way. George Pisk states as much when he explains why Abe is one of the novel’s most sympathetic characters: “his vitality contrasts so sharply with the almost universal apathy of the others. Hidden behind his truculence is a certain sense of morality and fair play” (1967: 68). The connection between vitality and humanity is not as tenuous as it may seem at first glance: as mentioned in Chapter Two, West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* can be read in part as an indictment of indifference in the immediacy of human distress. This same message is illustrated in *Locust* through the gregarious Abe, who is anything but cool and detached and is also, arguably, the novel’s most sympathetic character. His liveliness and his consideration for others—this time, an animal—are especially exhibited in the cock-fighting scene, when Abe does everything in his power to save his own dying bird, and is in anguish when it perishes (West [1939] 2009: 155-156). In Stacey Olster’s essay on West’s representations of Jewishness in his fiction, she



discusses Abe at length as one of West's few (presumably) Jewish characters. She notes Abe's overall positive portrayal, in particular his resiliency and toughness, and speculates that the author's portrayal of Abe "must exemplify what being a Jew was like for West" (Olster 1988: 60).

Most relevantly for this particular study, Olster also emphasizes that Abe harbours no illusions about his own identity (1988: 59), or for that matter, the nature of the world in which he lives. His refusal to see life through rose-coloured glasses makes him practically unique among the dream-obsessed characters of the novel. When Faye greets her male guests afterwards, playing the grand lady and greeting Claude Estee with a "Charmed to have you," Abe alone draws attention to her pretences by laughing (West [1939] 2009: 156). At Harry Greener's funeral, Abe is among the very few funeral-goers who steps forward to view the deceased's remains (129). Unlike Faye, whose expressions of grief are suspiciously theatrical, Abe's are restrained, even dignified. In both instances, his responses are the most honest and in the case of the second, perhaps the most caring and involved.

Faye's servitude to her own dream of becoming a famous actress causes her to compromise her personal integrity on many occasions. Abe, on the other hand, as a clear-headed realist, is in thrall to no false dreams that might cause him to do injury to himself or others. Although he speaks offensively at all times (outraged dignity, perhaps prompts his misogynistic description of the woman who threw him out of her apartment as "A lollapalooza—all slut and a yard wide" [West (1939) 2009: 63]), he never actually *acts* in a way that might damage his own personal integrity. The most egregious example of Faye's immorality in pursuit of her dreams is her actions toward Homer. Faye takes advantage of Homer's loneliness and obvious infatuation with her to move in to his home without paying rent. Homer also pays for her clothing and

entertainment, and waits on her, in effect becoming a servant in his own home. Both parties claim that it is a “business arrangement” (137), and that Faye will pay him back when she becomes a star. It is actually exploitation. Compare this behaviour to the clearheaded Abe’s rough sense of fair play. For services rendered, Abe pays Tod back in one of the few ways he is able, by offering him inside information on a horse-race. He brusquely tells Tod, “I don’t forget nothing. I remember. I remember those who do me dirt and those who do me favors” (64).

As a minor character, Abe is surprisingly well-rounded and resonant, despite the fact that one of his purposes in the narrative seems to be simply to provide comic relief. He is Faye’s antithesis in both appearance and personality. Faye is physically beautiful, but her affectations of charm and poise fool no one. Abe is physically abnormal, even repulsive to some, with an aggressive temperament to match, but his emotions are at least transparent and real. His truculence is described as something of a joke, endearing him to his friends, who enjoy teasing him (West [1939] 2009: 66). The consequences of Faye’s self-delusion and Abe’s realism are never made clear in the novel. Abe roars off in his car, never to reappear in the novel, the night of the disastrous party. Faye exits the scene soon after, doing irreparable psychological damage to Homer. Tod searches for her, but does not find her. Her physical survival is expected, although the novel hints that her ethical integrity has already been breached. Tod imagines Faye the merry cork bobbing on the ocean as finally being “set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork-sausage fingers and a pimpled butt picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly” (174). The “savage” is a prostitute’s client. The only other mention of her comes in the final apocalyptic scene, where Tod imagines her in his painting running from the mob of the cheated, along with himself, Harry, Homer and Claude. Abe is not mentioned. Stacey Olster believes that Abe is excluded from the scene because he does not fit into the painting’s two

categories of human subjects: those who believe in illusions and those who create them for others (1988: 59). I am inclined to agree with this view, and to add, further to that, that Abe is the *only* character in the novel who does not in some way traffic in dreams.

## II. Materializing “Utopia”

According to his chief biographer, before ultimately deciding to excise it from the galley proof, West wanted to place a Lewis Mumford quote at the beginning of the novel: “From the form of a city, the style of its architecture, and the economic functions and social groupings it shelters and encourages, one can derive most of the essential elements of a civilization” (quoted in Marin 1970: 309). Utopian dreams, as Mumford has also pointed out, tend to become more prevalent among the population during historical periods of social upheaval. As examples he cites Plato’s *Republic*, written during the period of Athenian civil disorder following the Peloponnesian War, and Thomas More’s *Utopia*, written during Henry VIII’s tumultuous reign (Mumford 1922: 11-12). Thus, it is not insignificant that Hollywood’s Golden Age, the 1930s, coinciding with the period of time West spent in Los Angeles, also overlaps historically with the Great Depression.

Los Angeles as utopia is a curious choice indeed. The area has long been known as a center for architectural whimsy. It has been hypothesized that the “fantasy aesthetic” of the film lots has spilled over into the city’s actual urban planning and building design (Kunstler 1993: 210). Throughout his years working as a screenwriter in Hollywood, West was continuously amazed by the wild *mélange* of architecture he saw there. Other writers from the same period were struck by this, for example, in Aldous Huxley’s *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, a young English archivist describes a Beverly Hills neighbourhood’s progression of styles:

“Gloucestershire followed Andalusia and gave place in turn to Touraine and Oaxaca, Düsseldorf and Massachusetts” (1939: 12). He is also horrified by his wealthy patron’s Hearstian castle, which he can only refer to cryptically as the “Object” (18). Budd Schulberg, the son of a prominent Hollywood producer, was accustomed to living among such curiosities, but even he describes a typically ugly Hollywood home in *What Makes Sammy Run?* as “the largest example of the worst kind of architecture I have ever seen. Hollywood Moorish” ([1941] 1978: 44).

As David Fine notes in the introduction to his edited collection of essays, *Los Angeles in Fiction*, almost all L.A. writers incorporate the region’s unusual and bizarre architecture into their novels (1984: 5), and the degree of grotesqueness tends to be exaggerated to illustrate the themes common to such works (9). He also states that the homes portrayed in L.A. fiction typically serve as mirrors of the characters’ psychological failings, mentioning Nathanael West explicitly, among others (11). This is undoubtedly true in West’s case. He too uses descriptions of Hollywood’s landscape and architecture to emphasize the region’s utter strangeness and artificiality. Both of these purposes are established in the very first chapter. As Tod drives up Pinyon Canyon at dusk, he sees houses that are bizarrely distorted replicas of a number of styles and periods. There are faux Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, Mediterranean villas, and Rhine castles, all incongruously transplanted to the landscape of Southern California. He finds these vulgarities comical, but also a bit sad. Tod muses: “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous” (West [1939] 2009: 61).

What makes the above quotation characteristically Westian is that while providing a critique of naïve taste, it does not mock the pretensions of the owners of these architectural nightmares. Instead, it penetrates to their psychological roots. These garish homes are like a

child's eager attempts to appear sophisticated, worthy only of pity. In fact, West's understanding of the architecture is very similar to his understanding of Faye Greener's affectations, which his protagonist describes as being backstage at an amateurish play ([1939] 2009: 104). Viewing the stagehands' exertions—or in the case of the houses, imagining the emotional needs motivating their construction—causes one to sympathize with another's pretensions, no matter how extravagant.

Homer Simpson's rented house is also presented in loving detail by West, who devotes a significant amount of space in his brief work to its description. The house is described as being a faux Irish cottage, with a fake thatch roof which is not actually made of straw, but "heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw" (West [1939] 2009: 81). Oddly enough, its individual rooms are decorated in a range of different styles. The living room is "Spanish" and the bedrooms are "New England." Like the film sets it resembles, very little is authentic. Care has been taken to convert one type of object into another, for the purpose of simulation: an iron bed is grained to mimic wood; a dresser is painted to achieve an unpainted pine look. The end result is nothing short of bizarre—a house that feels more like a cardboard façade than a home. West's description of Homer's thematically-designed house has much in common with key scenes from his previous novels which also highlight modern America's knack for creating physical spaces that are odd simulations of imagined realities: notably, the Latin-themed supper club in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Wu Fong's American region-themed bordello in *A Cool Million*—dream projections all.

In some of Walter Benjamin's unfinished notes and collected quotations, heavily edited and posthumously published as *The Arcades Project* (1999), the German-Jewish critic appears to put forth the idea that the shopping arcades of nineteenth century Paris (precursors to today's

shopping malls), provide an alternate history of the age. This is consistent with his oft-professed belief—one that has established him as an influential early figure in the field of cultural studies—that the everyday objects of daily life are themselves fascinating historical artefacts in the making. Quoting the *Encyclopédie française*, he writes: “...to begin the day as if you’ve just gotten off the boat from Singapore and have never seen your own doormat or the people on the landing...—it is this that reveals the humanity before you, unknown until now” (quoted in Benjamin 1999: 437). Benjamin suggests that the arcades represent the dreams of the collective city-dwellers made manifest (389).

Written some 40 years after Benjamin, Fredric Jameson’s Frankfurt School-influenced 1979 essay, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” contains some of the same general ideas regarding the notional meaning of material objects, only this time it is applied to works of popular culture, rather than urban planning and architecture. His major thesis is that

...all contemporary works of art—whether those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture—have as their underlying impulse—albeit in what is often distorted and repressed, unconscious form—our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived. (147)

Jameson illustrates this theory by providing a fascinating reading of *The Godfather* films, claiming that they, like all other works of mass culture, have simultaneous “utopian” (read: social) and “ideological” (political) functions (1979: 144-145). The latter function in *The Godfather*, he claims, is to encourage American citizens that their lives are not as they should be because of the moral corruption which finds its mythical source in the Mafiosi (146); he argues that people displace their unexpressed rage over their de facto governing by Big Business onto

the Mafia. The “utopian” function of the first *Godfather* film is quite different. Jameson theorizes that it reflects the white middle class’s confused feelings of envy toward the ethnic classes they repress, who embody traditional patriarchal family values (146-147), and thus, a much longed for protective social order that they no longer possess in their atomized, highly individualized modern social structure.

West’s descriptions of Hollywood homes illustrate these theories as well. The ostentatious, ridiculous dwellings are the dream-projections of their inhabitants. They represent a longing, as West wrote, “for beauty and romance” (West [1939] 2009: 61). This longing is not fulfilled, at least in the eyes of his protagonist. The homes end up looking like grotesque caricatures of what they are supposed to resemble. In the oft-cited “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” ([1936] 1969b), Benjamin explains how the mass commercial production of art essentially desacralizes or democratizes artwork, by removing it from its traditional domain. He argues that authentic works are embedded within a specific social context when produced, one which gives them legitimacy as objects worthy of veneration. Sever this ritual and the resulting product loses much of its original meaning. Even perfect reproductions, he states, lack the “aura” of traditional art-work, which he defines as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222). Once “aura,” a work’s authenticity, fades, it can be used or misused by the political powers that be to propagandize. Writing with Fascism’s appropriation of art in mind, Benjamin was yet hopeful that the freeing of art through mechanical reproduction might also have a positive democratic (or “revolutionary” [218]) function. The shadow side of the withering of aura is exhibited by West’s Hollywood homes. They are monstrosities in large part because they are so far removed from the craftsman’s original milieu. A Swiss chalet, for instance, with its slanted roof to keep off snow and thick walls to

keep its occupants warm, is appropriate in the Alps. It gives off the authentic atmosphere of that environment. Transplanted to sunny and arid Beverly Hills, this type of construction lacks the requisite aura. It is freed from its original domain, to laughable effect.

In Baudrillard's *America* (1988), a product of his road-trip across the continental United States, the philosopher claims that one of the fundamental differences between the European and the American worldview is that Europeans are fond of expounding on the nature of reality through abstract theory, or ideology. Americans, fundamentally practical, do the opposite, beginning with ideas and constructing something physically real out of them (84). This is precisely what he means by stating that part of the American project is "materializing freedom" (84), or taking the ideology of freedom and turning it into a material reality. He explains American exceptionalism, the splendidly arrogant idea that the United States is fundamentally different and special compared to the other nations of the world, as a conviction founded chiefly on "...the miraculous premise of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of—justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too" (77; italics added).

Baudrillard is impressed, and horrified, by the storied "can do" spirit that animates America, how a nation can build itself up so quickly, and manifest its founding myths so concretely (literally), through its public and private buildings: its houses, its skyscrapers, its highways, its monuments—all physical proof of an earthly utopia, many built in the span of only a couple generations. Baudrillard is not praising the Americans for their achievements. His frequently used term to describe these accomplishments, the "achieved utopia" is an ironic one, because a realized utopia is a paradox (Baudrillard 1988: 79). Baudrillard believes that the idea



that one can physically materialize a utopia is deeply naïve, and that the sort of “utopia” that has been created in the United States is banal. He writes, deeply ironically, that the achieved utopia is a paradise that looks like Santa Barbara or Disneyland: “Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise” (98).

Baudrillard points out a number of issues with the so-called American utopia. Still referring to Santa Barbara as a representative example, he states: “Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genres and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality... *What do you do when everything is available...?*” (Baudrillard 1988: 30; italics added). This is one of the poignant unarticulated questions haunting West’s Californians. Their senses are dulled by overstimulation, and they go seeking new diversions. The behaviours of Claude Estee’s crème-de-le-crème Hollywood social set aptly illustrate this idea. Attending a party at Claude’s luxurious home, Tod is shown a grotesque life-sized dead rubber horse illuminated by floodlights in his host’s pool. Another guest, a vapid Hollywood type, Mrs. Joan Schwartzen, exclaims with delight at the display, which she explains is there simply to amuse (West [1939] 2009: 71). A newcomer to Hollywood, Tod’s underwhelmed response reveals that he is little impressed by such bizarre affectations. Later, at the same party, the guests proceed to a brothel to watch blue films, which Claude presents to Tod as perfectly normal, light entertainment, despite the latter’s initial lack of interest in the proposed excursion. These moments, and others featuring Claude’s set, all present a picture of jaded decadence and shallow pleasure-seeking among the Hollywood elite.

Later on, again comparing the United States to Europe, Baudrillard claims that Europe’s constant crisis is that the historical ideals of the French Revolution have not yet been realized;

America's crisis is that they have materially achieved their ideals, but now are confronted with the problem of what comes next—how can they make their utopia permanent? (Baudrillard 1988: 77).<sup>vii</sup> This crisis of the achieved utopia reverberates throughout West's novel. In fact, as much as characters like Faye seem to indicate that unfulfilled dreams are making the Californians miserable, it is just as fair to say that *fulfilled* dreams are also slowly destroying their dreamers. The latter thesis is best exemplified through the lives of West's Midwesterners in California. There is a desperate quality to their sojourn in the region. When Maybelle Loomis meets Tod and Homer, Tod politely asks her how she likes the state. She laughs incredulously, saying, "Like California? [...] Why, it's a paradise on earth!" (West [1939] 2009: 138). Homer, another transplanted Midwesterner, agrees "gravely" (138), the implication being that both are mouthing the established dogmas. There is no question of disliking California, the land of milk and honey. Bordering the Pacific, it symbolizes the end of the frontier, and the absolute end of the line for the American dreamers. If they do not like life in California, there is nowhere left to go.

As a result, in West's appropriately surrealistic novel,<sup>viii</sup> California is depicted as a sort of never-never land, exhibiting the nightmarish qualities of a fever-dream. Besides the human-built architecture, which West describes with relish, even the natural landscape seems oddly artificial. Describing dusk, he writes: "The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful" (West [1939] 2009: 61). The "almost" is as important as the "Neon tube"—both hint that there are jarring elements destroying the illusion of natural beauty, making even it appear contrived. In another curious passage, Homer is described shopping in a supermarket where the food's natural

hues are further heightened by coloured spotlights (87-88), as if the original colours were not quite brilliant enough without being magnified. Both of these passages reflect West's vision of California as a contrived paradise, and especially, as an artificially *exaggerated* paradise.

Colours are never described as muted pastels, but always as electrically, disturbingly vivid, as if the landscape is wearing its stage make-up. Indeed, film and stagecraft are precisely what West is drawing upon here: his Los Angeles is depicted as the theatrical presentation of paradise, as a drag queen is the theatrical presentation of a woman. There is a sort of horrible beauty here, as the novel attempts to work out precisely what it means to fulfill dreams materially.

The idea of an earthly American utopia, as conceptualized by Baudrillard, is problematic for a number of reasons, the main one being what West constantly points to as afflicting his cheated Midwesterners: unrelenting boredom. The real trouble with the concept of an earthly utopia is the same one related to the notion of a Christian eternity, which is that a perfect existence means that no further changes or advances can be made, thus infinite repetition, thus boredom (Calinescu 1987: 66). With fulfillment comes a certain melancholy, that inchoate feeling of "Is this it?" This is the unfortunate by-product of the utopia, or as Žižek explains Lacan's paradox of desire through the illustration of Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece*, "in order to sustain itself as desire, to articulate itself (in a song), a piece must be missing" (2001: viii). This is precisely the problem of the achieved utopia as imagined by Baudrillard, and by West in *Locust*.

Movie sets also provide West with appropriate examples of the unfulfilling nature of materialized dreams. In *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald describes the film back-lots as "the torn picture books of childhood, like fragments of stories dancing in an open fire" (1941: 25). In one thematically significant scene, Tod searches for Faye on his studio lot, making an absurd journey

through various film sets, including a Western saloon and a Parisian side-street. He finally reaches a ten-acre field outdoors that serves as a dumping-ground for discarded set pieces. He thinks of it as a “Sargasso of the imagination,” or less romantically, and more to the point, “a dream dump” (West [1939] 2009: 132). He muses, “Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot” (132). The description of a lot full of discarded film sets as a dream dumping ground is an evocative one. The contrast between transcendent human dreams and their pathetic material representation could not be greater. From the perspective of the author/artist, the scene can also be read as a comment on the creative limits of art, the difficulty of drawing in the jumble of human impressions, memories, thoughts, and dreams, and converting them in to a coherent narrative. The sad debris of the back-lots is the detritus of dreams discarded, what is left over in the process of translating imagination into a more concrete artistic expression.

The entire episode implies a certain philosophical stance on the part of the implied author. That the content of the back-lots is all essentially junk—junk charged with a great deal of nostalgia—reveals, yet again, the novel’s recurring statement on the inevitable results of attempting to satisfy spiritual needs on the physical plane: that it cannot be done successfully. Philosophically, this goes against against the fundamentally American message written into the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that everyone is entitled to “the pursuit of happiness”—and more importantly, by implication to many, the achievement of happiness. West believes that by implanting this message in the minds of its citizens, American society is tragically setting them up for disappointment. His perspective is unique in that he looks at stored Hollywood film sets and props, and is prompted to imagine a graveyard for perished

dreams, rather than what many might see: a wealth of souvenirs or the clever work of craftspeople set aside for future use. His vision is both unusually negative and unusually humane. Although sceptical of the dreams and Hollywood's ability to make them manifest, he does not question the necessity of them. He has only pity and compassion for the dreamers themselves.

It is also worth noting that despite West's lugubrious reputation, he is not without a sly sense of humour. In the very first pages, Tod watches a downcast eighteenth century English army composed of cavalry and footmen pass by his office window. The barely-created illusion is immediately destroyed by the sudden appearance of a small, fat man, presumably the director, screaming into his megaphone, "Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!" (West [1939] 2009: 59). In all of *Locust*'s scenes West seems to delight in stripping bare Hollywood glamour to reveal the all-too-human side just underneath. Incongruity is one of his techniques, for instance in the "Sargasso Sea" film set scene, as well as his earlier descriptions of the homes of Hollywood. In Claude Estee's house, a replication of a Mississippi plantation, the owner shouts, "Here, you black rascal! A mint julep," to his Chinese servant, who understands that to mean, quite correctly, a Scotch and soda (69). Even in these comic moments (the last one being arguably distasteful despite Claude's obvious attempt at irony), the artificiality motif is maintained. West's materialized utopia is either absurd or horrible.

### **III. Hollywood as Secular Religion**

Published in 1939, this work has long been viewed as the quintessential Hollywood novel. In fact, it was a Hollywood novel before the genre was properly designated as such. In its early publication days, Edmund Wilson reviewed it positively, noting that "Mr. West has caught

the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible” (1994: 73). This is at least plausible; in the 1930s, Hollywood was scarcely viewed as a serious subject for literature, in particular by the East Coast literary establishment, like Wilson. During the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1930s, artistic talent from all over the country—like West and his *Locust* protagonist, Tod—migrated to the Californian Mecca, drawn by the lure of a steady pay check, something appreciated by even once-famous writers like Fitzgerald, who had fallen on hard times. When West wrote *Locust*, Hollywood had not yet been established, as it is today, as a trope for American disillusionment with material culture.<sup>ix</sup> Since his time, the genre has come to be associated with variations on the theme of dissolution (Chipman 1999: xii). The thematic thrust of West’s work was still relatively novel during its early publication days.

This being stated, although West’s work is one of the most-cited Hollywood novels today, and an early example of the genre, it is certainly not the first of its kind, and it is by no means wholly unique for its era. West often spent time at the famous Stanley Rose’s Hollywood Boulevard bookstore, a bookshop-cum-literary salon frequented by writers ranging from F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, to those rather less well-known today, like John O’Hara, Horace McCoy, Budd Schulberg, and John Sanford (Martin 1970: 271). With the exception of Schulberg, a certified “Hollywood brat,” none of them were native Californians. As specialists on the Hollywood novel have pointed out, unlike typical regionalist fiction, most Hollywood fiction, particularly early Hollywood fiction, is written by cultural outsiders, a factor that gives the Los Angeles novel a particular flavor—fascination, revulsion, or some mixture of both (Fine 1984: 1-2).

The peculiar ambience of the early Hollywood novel is also no doubt related to the region’s unique geography. Los Angeles is known today as one of the most horizontal of

America's cities, and this was true even during West's years in the 1930s. It is more like a series of enormous interconnecting residential suburbs than a single densely-populated urban centre. Its surrounding cities, for example Santa Monica, Pasadena, and Beverly Hills, are for all intents and purposes part of Los Angeles. It has been called "nineteen suburbs in search of a city," (Taylor 1983: 33) and "the easiest place in the world to disappear in" (35). It was in this isolated and somewhat bizarre environment, at the seedy Pa-Va-Sed apartment hotel (Martin 1970: 266), that West would compose his masterwork.

The entire Stanley Rose circle had literary aspirations, and all were ambivalent about having been drawn to Hollywood for work. They were further united by the insecurity of their positions as screenwriters. Tidy livings were possible, but you were only as good as your last script, and writers in Hollywood, by and large, rested on a precarious social perch. (In Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, Cecilia Brady, a producer's daughter, says of one of her writer friends: "I knew she was a writer, but I grew up thinking that writer and secretary were the same, except that a writer usually smelled of cocktails and came more often to meals" [1941: 99].) Given their shared backgrounds and the common artistic atmosphere, it is not surprising that these writers produced a somewhat similar product.

As mentioned, *Locust* is often mentioned alongside Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, thought to be based loosely on the life of genius MGM producer Irving Thalberg, who died young. The two writers, who were acquaintances, died within days of each other, and Fitzgerald's work was published posthumously in 1941, only two years later than *Locust*. However, while both are indictments of the banality of American popular culture, specifically the Hollywood film industry, Fitzgerald's final novel is dreamy and reflective, focused on the highest classes of society, while West's is comparatively seamier, focusing on the marginalized

under-classes. His obvious fascination with the grotesque is just one of the many differences between the two. If anything, as a significant number of critics have noticed, *Locust* is perhaps more similar to the much earlier *The Great Gatsby*, particularly in its depiction of the Tod Hackett-Faye Greener relationship, which has parallels with Fitzgerald's more compelling Gatsby-Daisy relationship.<sup>x</sup>

Besides sharing commonalities with Fitzgerald, Margaret Meade (2010) has noted that Horace McCoy, West's one-time colleague at Republic Pictures, wrote a book with ideas "alarmingly close" (250) to those of *Locust*, entitled *I Should Have Stayed Home*. McCoy's powerful and gritty works tend to be overlooked today, perhaps because of his reputation as purely a pulp fiction writer. He is best known for his two Hollywood novels, the existentialist *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (McCoy [1935] 1995), about the marathon dance craze of the 1930s, and the semi-autobiographical *I Should Have Stayed Home* (McCoy [1937] 1978). The latter novel, which predates *Locust* by two years, is similar to West's work in that it also focuses on the then little-discussed seedy side of Hollywood. It centers around the experiences of a 23-year-old Hollywood extra, the naïve transplanted Georgian, Ralph Carston. Like everyone in his circle, Ralph is desperately trying to break into the film industry. Seduced by a middle-aged debauched Hollywood widow, he is eventually exposed to all of the most sordid elements of life in America's dream capital.

*I Should Have Stayed Home* is similar to West's work in a number of regards. First of all, and most obviously, Edmund Wilson's comments to the contrary, it is one of the first true Hollywood novels (although both authors were preceded by the established West Coast detective noir genre<sup>xi</sup>, which contains many of the same elements). Unusually for the time, it chronicles the unglamorous lives of the town's struggling outsiders. As Johnny Hill, the publicity hack and



aspiring writer of the book tells his friends: “That side of Hollywood’s never been told. All you ever read about Hollywood is the waitress who gets a test and turns out to be a big shot. Like *A Star is Born*. That was a good picture and it’ll make a lot of money. That was *a* true story, but not *the* true story, if you know what I mean” (McCoy [1937] 1978: 93). He then proceeds to complain about the prominent writers who move to Hollywood to work in the industry, never leave their Bel-Air mansion circle of friends, and form a false impression of the town. It is possible that this idea of writing the “non-Hollywood Hollywood novel” was common currency at Stanley Rose’s bookstore.

Furthermore, both novels explore the complex relationship between the spiritual longing of America’s citizenry and the phenomenal success of the Hollywood film industry, although they draw different conclusions. West’s novel suggests that spiritually impoverished Americans have created Hollywood in a pathetic and futile attempt at self-fulfillment. McCoy’s perhaps less intellectually profound, commonsense view, as propounded by *I Should Have Stayed Home*, is that Hollywood popular culture is cancerous, provoking destructive longings among the American hoi polloi. This message is communicated with all the subtlety of a jackhammer in the scene where Ralph and his not-so-platonic friend Mona Matthews view the corpse of Dorothy Trotter, their mutual friend, an extra who has committed suicide as the result of an unfortunate chain of events following her lack of success finding work in Hollywood. In response to the swarming reporters’ cries to photograph “the Instrument of Death”—a stocking—an enraged Mona fills the corpse’s stiff arms with fan magazines (McCoy [1937] 1978: 161-162). In a previous scene, Mona expresses her hatred of the magazines as pro-Hollywood propaganda luring young dreamers to California: “There ought to be a law against them. Printing all those goddam lies, all those goddam pictures of Crawford and Gaynor and Loy and Lombard and all

the others beside their swimming-pools and in specially made clothes and telling them about how they started at the bottom and rose to fame and fortune..." (54-55). She blames the magazines for Dorothy's resorting to criminal activity, arguing that the magazines made her and the millions of other small town girls like her discontented with their own lives. She tells Ralph, "They say to themselves: 'If they did it, so can I.' And they come to this goddam town and starve to death" (55). In passages like these, McCoy draws a simple cause and effect relationship between movie culture and social problems.

Meade's linking of West and McCoy is a sensible one. Oddly enough, however, no West scholar to date has seemed to notice the glaring similarities in content between John Fante's 1939 *Ask the Dust* and West's work of the same year. Fante was another novelist, screenwriter, and frequenter of Stanley Rose's bookstore, and undoubtedly at least an acquaintance of West. His novel about a down-on-his-luck young writer infatuated by an unstable Mexican waitress is written in a variation on the "hardboiled," clipped style favoured by so many writers of the period, from the proletarian writers like Nelson Algren and Edward Dahlberg, to the detective novelists like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Fante's novel focuses on his main character Arturo Bandini's dual passions—a writing career and a woman—but the cruel, luminous presence of Los Angeles looms over the novel like an omnipresent God. Like West, Fante is also clearly fascinated by the phenomenon of immigration to California by Midwesterners who are lured by the promises of the land of sunshine and oranges. Fante also portrays them as disillusioned pilgrims to a false Holy Land. In a passage remarkably similar to many of West's in *Locust*, Fante writes about the emigrants who are

...doomed to die in the sun, a few dollars in the bank, enough to subscribe to the *Los Angeles Times*, enough to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little

papier-mâché homes were castles. The uprooted ones, the empty sad folks, the old and the young folks, the folks from back home. These were my countrymen, these were the new Californians. With their bright polo shirts and sunglasses, they were in paradise, they belonged. ([1939] 2006: 45)

For both Fante and West the dominant feeling when discussing the newcomers to California is compassion for the innocents—Fante’s is tinged with irony—which makes more sense in an American context than it would a European one. The Californians, after all, can be at least partly justified in their decision to migrate by the American frontier myth beckoning them westward. Both writers highlight how the migrants’ homes showcase their sad delusions in a material way. They also both allude to the fact that the newcomers seek out strange new religions in California, although West’s cultists are central to his novel, while Fante only mentions “Aimee’s Temple” ([1939] 2006: 47) in passing, in the same brief chapter that this passage comes from.

Another similarity between Fante and West’s depictions of California as sham Promised Land is their ironic use of California’s much touted sunny climate. Sunshine, typically used to symbolize the clarity of reason, does just the opposite in West and Fante’s fiction. It dazzles the poor dreamers, obscuring their vision. West writes that his cheated soon discover in California that “sunshine isn’t enough” (West [1939] 2009: 177). In a Fante (or Bandini) speech written as free indirect discourse, the narrator imagines telling his migrants: “You’ll eat hamburgers year after year and live in dusty, vermin-infested apartments and hotels, but every morning you’ll see *the mighty sun, the eternal blue of the sky*...you’ll still be in paradise, boys, in *the land of sunshine*” ([1939] 2006: 46; italics added). As if these were not clear enough warnings of the sun’s potential destructive force, both writers conclude their novels with descriptions of carnage

in the sun. West's Tod imagines a fiery holocaust consuming Los Angeles. Fante concludes with Bandini giving up on his search for Camilla in the wasteland of the Mojave Desert.

Presumably, she is another victim of California's false promises.

McCoy, Fante and West explored similar subjects in their Hollywood novels during this period, but West's illustrations of them are the most fantastical and bizarre. They are also the most violent. Fante, McCoy and Fitzgerald portray naked despair in their novels, but only West imagines that this sorrow will resurface as apocalyptic rage. His narrative ends with a riot which hints at a greater social revolution to come. The actual riot, which takes place while Tod imagines the last days of Los Angeles, is the natural culmination of a near-hysterical film premiere. This climax is preceded by arguably the most significant passage in the novel, in which West explains why the bored and cheated Midwesterners are driven, finally, to rioting:

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed.

They have slaved and saved for nothing. ([1939] 2009: 177-178)

This final riot scene is consistent with West's long-held personal view, also expressed in *A Cool Million* and several other of his writings,<sup>xii</sup> that American society was seething with latent violent impulses. The riot is forecast throughout the novel, in particular through the character of the doltish Homer Simpson, who is generally used to represent all of the Americans West believed were sublimating their yearnings in Hollywood. Homer's severe repression, as signaled by his

compulsively twitching hands, is finally unleashed at the end of novel, in the midst of the riot scene. Homer attacks Adore Loomis, who had been mischievously teasing him, before becoming engulfed in the rioting mass. Homer is carried away, openmouthed in a silent scream.

Violence, despair, dissolution, and disappointment: these are the notes commonly sounded by the Hollywood writers of the 1930s, and West was no exception. Beyond style considerations, the chief element in West's writing that sets him apart from all the rest—with the possible exception of Fante—is his focus on spiritual matters. West is absolutely not, like Eliot, advocating a return to traditional religious values as a way of making sense of modernity; however, he does focus on the surprising similarities between religious worship and the modern cult of celebrity operating at its epicenter, Los Angeles. He does this in such a way as to highlight the similar psychological function that both religion, and now the culture industry, play in the lives of Americans of his generation: both fulfill the human need to find meaning outside of themselves. Paradoxically, by doing this people magnify themselves, because they seek, as James defines spiritual longing, something vast outside themselves that is also grounded in themselves. This is the meaning of a quotation in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, also published in 1939, in one of the interlude chapters describing the simple pleasures of the migrants on the roads, including film-going. The unnamed narrative voice of the migrant says, "I was to a show oncet that was me, an' more'n me; an' my life, an' more'n my life, so ever'thing was bigger" (327). West's constant comparison of Hollywood to religion effectively indicates how both are symptomatic of the human spiritual need to place one's life within a larger, grander narrative. As James states, the religious impulse is based on the love of life: "Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" ([1902] 2002: 551).

Given the waning of influence of traditional religions in 1930s America (and today), Hollywood is made to serve this purpose, and West's novel documents this cultural phenomena.

The riot mentioned above is one of the many examples of West's Hollywood/religion comparison. There is definitely a strong element of religious fervor depicted in this riot. Firstly, it takes place outside "Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre" (the name itself, a variation of Coleridge's famous lines, is likely West poking fun at the idea of Jewish control of Hollywood), an example of Schulberg's disliked "Hollywood Moorish," described as having a rose-hued dome and minarets. A reporter with a microphone is compared to a "revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward the ecstasy of fits" (West [1939] 2009: 176). A young girl is attacked during the chaos, as if representative of a virgin sacrifice. Tod attempts to save her at one point, but her ultimate fate is never known. Her rape and murder are implied. Other obvious religious elements in these final pages emerge from Tod's daydream about his planned painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." Injured by the crowd, and reverting to a dream-like state of shock, Tod imagines the city in flames. Two groups of people populate his paintings: a mob of torchbearers, and those who flee before them, including many of his companions, and himself. The former group is composed of "the people who came to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers—all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence" (184). This group is joyous, singing and dancing by the light of their flames.

This concluding scene provides the apotheosis of West's central metaphor: Hollywood as inadequate secular religion. Kahn's garish pleasure palace is substituted for a recognizable, authentic place of worship—a temple, synagogue, church, mosque or the like. Inside the "holy" structure, instead of the presence of the divine, there are film idols. The torchbearers evoke both

a mob and a religious procession in ceremony. Finally, the rioters, both victimized and victimizers, are portrayed as cultists practicing their ecstatic religion of star worship. Amidst the screams and the tears, there is also laughter. It is clear that the crowd partly enjoys the chaos of the riot, using it as an opportunity to unleash their baser, socially condemned instincts. Male rioters taking liberties with female rioters in the *mêlée* are only laughed at. "...this is a regular free-for-all," chuckles one woman (West [1939] 2009: 183). A rape joke about "Ripping up a girl with scissors" is also a source of humour to the cheerfully anarchic crowd (183). Such scenes are indicative not only of religion/Hollywood's function of providing meaning, but also the cathartic power of religious ecstasy, transposed to the Hollywood milieu. A riot at a film premiere provides the individuals in the crowd with an opportunity to express repressed emotions in much the same way as a religious ceremony, or Bacchic orgy would.

In his excellent *New York Times* article on West's ill-fated publishing history, Gerald Howard (1990) states that West's insight was that the residents of California, composed of these migrated Midwesterners, film hangers-on, religious cult followers, etc.—the detritus of American society—provided the fertile soil in which American Fascism would root itself. My contention is rather the same thing, but reversed: that West's *Locust* implies that America has Fascist tendencies already, but that they *manifest* themselves through the general populace's fixations. There is no real difference between the pathological worship of film stars and the obsessive attitudes displayed by West's religious cultists; they are frequently even the same group of people. Hollywood is merely one emotional outlet for West's characters, and religion is another. Not surprisingly, both flourish in his Southern California.

West makes this very point in the work, in part through the persons of two minor characters, Adore Loomis, the precocious child actor, and his overbearing mother, Maybelle. In

her one appearance, Mrs. Loomis is portrayed as the quintessential stage mother, certain of her child's talent and potential for stardom. Her obsession with Adore achieving success in the film industry is mirrored by her religion and health obsessions. *À propos* of nothing, she asks Tod and Homer who they "follow," and then volunteers the information that she is a raw-foodist, abstaining from all cooked foods, because "Death comes from eating dead things" (West [1939] 2009: 139). It is not clear whether Mrs. Loomis' "leader," Dr. Pierce, is leading a health or religious movement. Based on this brief exchange and the single other mention of Dr. Pierce in passing later in the novel as someone who could promise miracles (184), his raw-foodist movement definitely has many elements similar to that of a radical religious sect. The juxtaposition of Mrs. Loomis's dual compulsions is highly significant: West is again drawing parallels between Hollywood and religion as similar popular folk remedies for the same spiritual ailments of malaise and ennui. Mrs. Loomis's wholehearted, unquestioning devotion to Dr. Pierce's precepts is also suggestive of religious piety.

The Mrs. Loomis interlude appears to be a segue into a description of Tod's exploration of the local cults, whose rites include physical fitness, abstaining from salt, fortune-telling, necromancy, and "brain-breathing" (West [1939] 2009: 142). His interest is professional: the cultists are to be the subjects of his latest painting. He sits in on their services as a dispassionate observer, a sociologist doing field research. He is not interested in their rhetoric, but the motivating forces behind it, which he identifies powerfully, if obliquely, as "messianic rage," which has the power to "destroy civilization" (142). The feeling of roiling, barely suppressed anger recurs frequently in this novel. His religious cultists are led by men and women who are described respectfully as prophets, not mocked as irrational, or chastised as anti-social, which is



how other authors might treat them. This treatment suggests that despite the anarchic forces they are about to unleash, their rage is to some extent justifiable.

As fantastic as West's depiction of religious cults in Los Angeles seems to be, it is actually grounded in fact. From the 1880s to the 1930s, Los Angeles was the best-advertised city in America (Fine 1990: 198), attracting millions of Americans from elsewhere in the nation, as well as immigrants from abroad. Southern California was a dumping-bin for all kinds of spiritualists and quack movements, with real names like "the Mighty I Am, Krotona, Mankind United, and Ham and Eggs" (198). As early as the 1920s, there were so many fortune-tellers and spiritualists in Los Angeles that the city began licensing them (Simonson 1989: 103). West barely had to be inventive when conjuring up his cultists. Los Angeles was (and is) already a spiritual playground, full of fringe religious groups whose real beliefs and practices were far beyond the wildest reaches of his imagination. It is entirely appropriate that Los Angeles would become a centre for both the film-making industry, and the most extravagantly inventive native religious sects in America. These home-grown industries developed as money-making propositions, but they also simultaneously grew to fulfill shared national dreams. As Jameson puts it, they serve the utopian function of expressing what individuals in a society innately feel that life should be.

There is something essentially Gnostic about the inventiveness of West's cultists. In his provocative book attempting "religious criticism," *The American Religion* (2006), Harold Bloom advances the theses that America is now a post-Protestant or Post-Christian nation, despite all protestations to the contrary (11), and that the major elements of this national religion are Orphism, Enthusiasm, and Gnosticism (40). Gnosticism especially, according to Bloom, plays a significant role in the development of all the native-born American (nominal) Protestant sects

which he examines, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS); the Church of Christ, Scientist; the Southern Baptist Convention; the Pentecostals, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>xiii</sup> By Gnosticism, Bloom is not referring to the early Christian heretic sect, but the adjective in general terms, which he describes in an American context: “It is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves” (36). The Gnostic believes, ultimately, that salvation comes from within. Examples of this range from the Baptist rhetoric of the necessity of developing a “close, personal friendship with Jesus”—which, as Bloom points out, boils down to self-knowledge (238)—and at its extreme, the LDS Church, the orthodoxy of which holds that human beings are coeternal with God, and can become gods in their own right through a process known as “exaltation.” Bloom’s theorizing makes the connection between the fundamentally Gnostic nature of American religion and the country’s powerful social mythology of belief in the individual’s limitless potential.

A current of Bloom’s Gnosticism runs through *Locust*. Besides the cultists, it is best exhibited by the aspiring film stars like Faye. Faye and those like her in California during West’s time and today, firmly believe in their own exceptionalism, that something innate in them will be recognized and celebrated as remarkable by society. Virtually all Hollywood novels contain examples of this blind faith: the extras’ quest for stardom in *I Should Have Stayed Home*, or Arturo Bandini’s obsession with becoming a major author in *Ask the Dust*. This is the true meaning of West’s description of Faye by Tod as maddeningly untouchable and unbreakable. In one of the scenes where Tod contemplates raping Faye, West writes: “It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her” (West [1939] 2009: 107). This is often interpreted in light of Tod’s sexual fascination with Faye. That it is, but it also

communicates Faye's fanatical certainty of her own impending stardom. Her faith in herself—unwarranted, at least given Tod's appraisal of her acting earlier in the narrative—is of a quasi-religious nature. It is this faith that sustains her and infuriates Tod. She does not need him or his love because her own self-belief is enough to feed her ego. This interpretation also makes sense given the passages that immediately precede it on Faye's obsessive tendency to daydream film scenarios in order to divert herself and otherwise add colour to life.

Overwhelming faith in one's own innate capabilities is a peculiarly American failing (and strength). It is linked in part to the firmly held ideal of equality. For an outsider's perspective, we turn again to Baudrillard's *America*. He writes, "Just look at this girl who serves you in the guest-room: she does so *in total freedom*, with a smile, without prejudice or pretentiousness, as though she were sitting opposite you. The situation is not an equal one, but she does not pretend to equality. Equality is part of the way of life here" (Baudrillard 1988: 93). He compares his female server's behaviour to that of Sartre's waiter who makes a great show of being a waiter as if to pretend that he is utterly free and equal to the customer being served. Regardless of whether or not Baudrillard's examples are representative, they do serve to illustrate what he perceives as an unusual feature of the American ethos. In a world where a waitress can become a film idol in the wink of an eye, equality is presumed. Faye is a dreamer who firmly believes in this American social myth, and as a result, in her own limitless potential.

A final example of how West's novel draws attention to the religio-spiritual side of Hollywood is also one of the most obvious: the author's choice of title/s. After rejecting the original *The Cheated* as too pretentious, he also considered calling it, similarly, *The Grass Eaters*, and *Days to Come*, before settling on *The Day of the Locust* (quoted in West 1997: 785).<sup>xiv</sup> These last three titles all have major religious significance. "Grass eaters," besides

generally suggesting utter poverty and desolation, may also have been a Biblical reference to Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian king who makes lengthy appearances in the Book of Daniel, during the period of the Babylonian Captivity. Nebuchadnezzar is humbled for his excessive pride by suddenly going insane and being driven from his people into the wilderness for seven years. There he “did eat grass as oxen” (Dan. 4:33, KJV). *Days to Come* and *The Day of the Locust* are obviously references to the Apocalypse. The only reason West did not choose the former, he writes, was that it was already used by his friend Lillian Hellman for a play (785). The “locusts” mentioned in his eventual final title choice are perhaps best known Biblically as one of Moses’ ten plagues on Egypt. The most apt symbolism, however, whether intended by West or not, is the title’s possible connection to the locusts of Revelation, interpreted by Biblical scholars variously as rampaging armies, futuristic war-machines and all nature of other destructive forces. The locusts, unleashed at the sounding of the fifth trumpet, are given the power to torture the people of earth for five months, “And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them” (Rev. 9:6, KJV).

It is unclear whether West’s “locusts” refer to the producers of the culture industry, as critics like Rita Barnard and Jonathan Veitch may be inclined to believe; the author’s hordes of cheated and disappointed citizens, menaces to themselves and others, as Auden implicitly and more recent critics like Bruce Chipman explicitly believe; or if it is simply a shorthand reference to the terrible fate everyone will suffer in the American End of Days. Chipman states that the “locusts” are the general film-going public who “embody the anarchic power which West feels will destroy America” (1999: 55). Given the novel’s constant emphasis on the latent violence of the crowd, and its climactic final scene, a crowd of film-consumers rioting, Chipman’s interpretation is the most likely. It is particularly interesting to compare this final title choice to

another of West's proposed titles, *The Grass Eaters*, because the two reflect the complex totality of his opinion of the Californians, as victims turned victimizers. To eat grass, in a Biblical sense or otherwise, is to be brought down to the most degraded and demoralized state of being. To be a locust, on the other hand, is also to eat grass, but its connotations suggest a sort of power, that of an active, threatening destructive force. Whatever the author's intentions, all of his proposed titles, including the final one, express the consequences of stunted spirituality in human beings, whether that be despair or rage.

As much as Hollywood has been deplored as a graveyard for talented, serious writers like West, Fitzgerald, and the like, as the site of the hugely culturally-influential film industry, as well as the catch-basin for America's eccentrics—West called it home to the cream of America's madmen ([1939] 2009: 118)—it provided fantastic grist for their literary mills. As scholars including Tom Dardis and Mark Eaton note, the writing talent drawn to Hollywood in the 1930s may have overall benefited from their time there, both financially and creatively. West's hack-work for the “poverty row” studio, Republic, subsidized the time needed to write *Locust* (Dardis 1976: 170). The themes that emerged from the early Hollywood novels of West, Fitzgerald, Fante and McCoy covered similar ground. All of these writers portrayed Hollywood as a land of unfulfilled dreams. West in particular captured the spiritual quality of this longing by repeatedly drawing parallels between the seekers' quests and religious worship. He did this in a number of ways, but the most pronounced is his repeated highlighting of one major function of religion and the film industry: namely, the way both human constructions satisfy the religious impulse, as defined by James, of connecting to a transcendent reality. This reality is external to the self, but also the self writ large. West's novel shows how Hollywood and religion are both ways of attempting to go beyond human finitude.

#### IV. Conclusion

West's final work tends to be studied today because of its significance as an early guide to modern mass culture. As Leslie Fiedler has noted, in reference to *Locust* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West's novels open up "possibilities of capturing the quality of experience in a mass society" ([1960] 1992: 489). As one of the prototypical Hollywood novels, *Locust* is among the first, and arguably still the best, to use the film capital as a trope for the vacuity and even horror of American popular culture. For cultural theorists *Locust* contains almost an embarrassment of riches. It might be used to illustrate Adorno's culture industry, Baudrillard's simulacra, or Jameson's postmodernism. It has also mellowed considerably over the years, contributing to a more mainstream appeal. What was "too original, grotesque, intelligent, unsentimental and unsparing to attract an audience in its own time" (Howard 1990: n.p.), is now viewed as a typical portrait of Hollywood. It is still a shocking book in many regards, but as West and his works grow in stature among Americanists, reaching quasi-canonical status, it is arguably no longer a disruptive one.

In comparison to other novels published in 1939, even limiting ourselves only to West's immediate peers, for example John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, or Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, *Locust* seems much less dated, almost contemporary, in fact. Steinbeck's praised epic is still very much a typical social realist work of the day, while Chandler's is also a period piece in a different way, in his case as one of the quintessential hardboiled detective novels of the era. What is odd is that West's ridiculous comic menagerie—Abe the truculent dwarf, Earl the unemployed cowboy extra, the Gingo "Eskimo" family, et al.—despite their '30s slang and industry jargon, are much more believable today as characters than Chandler's unbelievably smooth-talking Marlowe, or Steinbeck's preternaturally kindly and hard-working salt-of-the-

earth Joad family. West's surreal Hollywood backdrop—all surfaces and simulacra—also provides a tableau that is recognizable today. His dark brand of irony, his fascination with commercial culture, his interest in the grotesque and the absurd, are all part of the reason why he is often viewed as a proto-postmodernist, a precursor to writers like Thomas Pynchon (Wisker 1990: 10).

In addition, from the perspective of this study, West's work is also still interesting for the serious ethical questions it raises about Western society—questions that have not been resolved today in the twenty-first century. As James Light, one of the most morally probing of West's biographers claimed in the 1970s, *The Day of the Locust*, like all of the author's novels, reveals “a deep need for something worth believing in and searching for” (1971: 156). It is not true to the Westian ethos to state that he believed the film industry, organized religion, politics, art, material wealth, or any other human invention could be that something. The nightmarish quality of West's Hollywood is the result of his characters' desperate dreams being translated into materiality. *Miss Lonelyhearts* asks the enormous philosophical question: why would a good God let human beings suffer? *Locust* poses another colossal question, nothing less than what is the meaning of life? West makes no attempt to answer it, confining his novel to the subject of the human spiritual longing to answer the question. *Locust* provides an extended example of the folly of people turning to the Hollywood dream factory for that elusive sense of meaning.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Christopher Ames believes that it was finally filmed some 35 years after publication because its bleak view of the California dream-seekers had much in common with the general dissatisfaction with material culture prevalent in the 1970s (2007: 47).

<sup>ii</sup>Most criticism of the novel explores its religious themes, including the founding scholarly and bibliographical work of the '60s and '70s. Some articles and essays that focus specifically on *Miss Lonelyhearts*' portrayal of Christianity include Arthur Cohen's (1971) "The Possibility of Belief: Nathanael West's Holy Fool," Marian Crowe's (2005) "The Desert, the Lamb, the Cross: Debased Iconography in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*," Robert Edenbaum's (1971) "To Kill God and Build a Church: Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*," Richard Lynch's (2005) "Saints and Lovers: *Miss Lonelyhearts* in the Tradition," and Marcus Smith's (1971) "Religious Experience in *Miss Lonelyhearts*."

<sup>iii</sup>I purposely echo Daniel Schwarz's credo in *In Defense of Reading*: "Literature is by humans, for humans, and about humans. The humanistic critic understands artists' lives in human terms rather than as superhumans of a different species, and realizes that there is a place for biography in understanding a writer's oeuvre" (2008: x).

<sup>iv</sup>West critics as a whole have never been sure what to make of Homer, whose behaviour is bizarre and inconsistent. All of the characters have symbolic functions, but Homer alone tends to be thought of as a *wholly* representative figure, not an individualized character. Stanley Hyman calls him the most "completely abstracted character in the book" (1962: 36), and James Light states, "As the name implies, Homer is representative of the timeless, suffering man" (1971: 161).

<sup>v</sup>Mark Eaton has an interesting take on the literary meaning of Tod's rape fantasies. He links them to West's film-work, claiming that Tod's fantasy of stalking Faye resembles a B-movie thriller's plot (2009: 483). The salacious language used, he argues, is actually West's critique of the film industry's pandering to the public's basest instincts.

<sup>vi</sup>In a letter to Minna and Milton Abernethy during his first early stint in Hollywood, he relates his experiences as a writer for film: "The studio I am working Columbia is a highly organized and very practical business place. Five minutes after I arrived I was given an assignment a picture called BLIND DATE and I have been working nine hours a day on it since then with a full day on Saturday" (quoted in West 1997: 781). For more on West's understanding of Hollywood as a business, see also his short story, "Business Deal" ([1933] 1997b), on negotiations between an avaricious studio chief executive and a hardheaded young screenwriter.



<sup>vii</sup>Post 9/11, and in light of today's massive financial crisis, this "problem" may now be resolved.

<sup>viii</sup>It should be noted that although this work is frequently described as surrealist, West himself objected to a review of *Locust* that referred to him as a surrealist author. His chief biographer Jay Martin speculates that his objection was based on the belief that the general public equated surrealism with incomprehensibility, and that such a review would therefore have a negative impact on the book's sales (1970: 338).

<sup>ix</sup>Richard Pells describes West's depiction of Hollywood in *Locust* aptly as a "cosmic metaphor for the falsity, corruption and decadence of contemporary civilization" (1973: 222).

<sup>x</sup>See Robert Emmet Long's biography and literary study, *Nathanael West* (1985: 139-141) and Christopher Ames' essay on the screen adaptation of the novel, "The Day of the Locust: 1939 and 1975" (2007: 55-56), for more on the two works' shared elements.

<sup>xi</sup>Dashiell Hammett is usually regarded as the progenitor of the genre.

<sup>xii</sup>See especially "Some Notes on Violence" (West [1932] 1997) in Sacvan Bercovitch's edited Library of America West anthology.

<sup>xiii</sup>He also devotes a chapter to Jehovah's Witnesses, a sect which Bloom considers antitypical as an American religion. Unlike the other religious traditions he examines, the Jehovah's Witnesses are fiercely non-Gnostic in the sense that they believe in the widest chasm possible between an omnipotent God and a struggling, subservient humanity. Self-knowledge plays absolutely no part in their salvation, only God's will.

<sup>xiv</sup>Robert Emmet Long (1985: 111) suggests that the eventual title choice may have been inspired by Gilbert Seldes' 1939 book on the Depression, entitled *The Years of the Locust*.

## Conclusion

### The New Old West

“I am a clown...but there are times when even clowns must grow serious.”

—Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*

About a year and a half before West and his new wife Eileen died in a car crash, the author wrote to his publisher at Random House, Bennett Cerf, about the new direction he was heading in with his writing: “One thing I have lately begun to feel (and sales have really nothing to do with it), is that I have come to the end of my interests in a certain kind of writing. I have a new book planned which I intend to keep extremely simple and full of the milk of human kindness, and I am not joking, I really mean it” (quoted in Martin 1970: 392). West was right to pre-emptively assert his earnestness; his four previous novels had been considered as dark and misanthropic as they come. Among those who recognized his work at all, he had managed to build up a reputation as a chronicler of despair. Even Fitzgerald, an acquaintance who publicly praised West’s writing and had recommended him for the Guggenheim, thought his fiction was “morbid as hell, doomed to the underworld of literature” (quoted in Meade 2010: 281). Especially in his younger years, West had scorned writing anything with even a hint of sentimentality. Not surprisingly, he also preached concision, mercilessly cutting out silly, superfluous things like character development, psychology, unnecessary dialogue and description, urging other American writers to likewise “Forget the epic, the master work” (West [1933] 1997c: 401). It seemed like a decided departure then, when at the age of 35 years, he told his writing partner at R.K.O, the director Boris Ingster, that he planned “to try a novel...in the

great tradition of novels, to really probe, to really go all the way, and not to worry about overpopulating the book...with characters if they are necessary” (quoted in Martin 1970: 394).

West’s newfound desire to write a book in a completely different cast from his earlier ones may also have been reflective of the fact that he had entered a happier phase of his personal life. He married for the first time in the spring of 1940. The bride was one Eileen McKenney, the very same Eileen immortalized as the loveable ingénue in her sister Ruth’s partly-autobiographical book, *My Sister Eileen* (1938), which later became a wildly successful Broadway play, film, and musical. It also inspired another Broadway musical, the still-popular *Wonderful Town*. The unexpected romance between the introverted intellectual West and the buoyant and childlike McKenney may have raised some eyebrows (in no small part because some assumed that he was a “confirmed bachelor”), but it certainly seemed to cheer up the usually-morose writer. Josephine Herbst was surprised to hear about their quick courtship and marriage, but believed that “it was a genuine love match and I never expected Pep to make one” (quoted in Meade 2010: 282).

Besides getting his romantic affairs on track for the first time in his adult life, West was also doing well financially for once. His 1939 novel, *The Day of the Locust*, sold poorly, only 1,464 copies (Meade 2010: 264), to be exact, but West was beginning to be recognized and compensated smartly for his work as a screenwriter. Cashing in on Hollywood’s penchant for making films based on published novels—even ones that had not sold and that they had not read—West’s screen treatment of his 1934 novel, *A Cool Million*, sold to Columbia for \$10,000 (Martin 1970: 380). When the studio producers actually got around to reading the treatment, which bore little to no resemblance to the original novel about an American Fascist takeover and a maimed young hero, they had no idea how it could be made into a viable, saleable film, and all

production plans were dropped. That mattered little to West, who had by now established himself as a player in the film industry. Well-paying screenwriting jobs from Columbia and R.K.O. continued to roll in, and West and his newly acquired family (including McKenney's son from her first marriage, Tommy) began to enjoy a new level of comfort and security in Hollywood.

What would West have accomplished as a writer if only he had not ignored a stop sign that afternoon, December 22, 1940, on the dusty Golden State Highway, just east of El Centro? Overlooked in his own time by the public—it did not help that his publication history was a comedy of errors of mismanagement<sup>i</sup>—West is viewed by some today as the “patron saint of the literary dispossessed” (Howard 1990). He was rediscovered in the 1950s and ‘60s, the renaissance sparked by the reprinting of his complete works by Farrar in 1957, and since then has been periodically “rediscovered” every decade or so by a new wave of West scholars, struck anew by the significance and idiosyncrasy of a writer whose era is usually viewed as a fallow period for American literature. Today West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* are recognized by many as American novels of the first tier; indeed, at the height of his “rediscovery” in the 1960s, some even went so far as to rank *Miss Lonelyhearts* as “one of the three finest American novels of our century,” along with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (Hyman 1962: 27). William Carlos Williams believed that he would have developed into “the finest prose talent of our age” ([1950] 1971: 138). If only he had lived, goes the universal lament, he might have produced something *truly* significant, something “beyond the accusatory” (Herbst [1961] 1971: 20). It is tempting to imagine that at long last, a mellow and mature West, newly unencumbered of his heavy double portion of world weariness, might have written a novel that better displayed his ethical concerns to the public,

who tended to overlook them, in common with many early critics who deemed his writing merely sordid.

It was not to be. And what is more, it might not have been likely to begin with. It is an unhappy truth that secure, well-adjusted people are not known, by and large, for writing compelling novels. What is more, West's screenwriting career had just skyrocketed, and he had taken on new time-consuming, if pleasant, domestic duties. He had signed a contract with Random House for his unwritten fifth novel in April of 1940 (Martin 1970: 395), some eight months before he was to die, but no draft was forthcoming. To his friends and his publisher, he was cagey about the novel's outlines. Yes, it would provide a more positive, hopeful portrayal of humanity, but its actual plot was ever-changing. According to West at one point in the writing process, it was to be about a newspaper writer's investigations of the so-called "friendship clubs" of the '30s. West described their promotion in actual newspaper advertisements: "For a small fee they promise to put a prospective member in touch with friends who will make his or her life joyous, turning their dull, drab existence into a full round of dances and parties, where they will probably meet the husband or wife best suited to them" (quoted in Martin 1970: 396). If this sounds familiar, it was no mistake. The writer's new book was consciously intended to be a new working out of the themes of *Miss Lonelyhearts* (Martin 1970: 395). Of course, there is no way of knowing whether the newly positive West might have produced a *Miss Lonelyhearts* sequel of sorts, superior to the original. Although the slim novel has been described as morbid and even nihilist, the writing is taut and precise. Would a longer, more cheerful *Miss Lonelyhearts* have resulted in the destruction of the fine tension of its predecessor? Or would it have presented the earlier novel's ethical themes in a way more palatable to the general public, finally earning West the popular success as a writer that he had long craved? Perhaps it would have bridged the

curious gap between the dark surrealist literary West and the West of B-movie fame, purveyor of trite, mainstream film fare (*I Stole a Million*, anyone?).

What is fairly certain, and what this study has attempted throughout to illustrate, is that West's compassion as a writer was always present in his novels, even when they dealt with the darkest subject matter, and in the most sordid of terms. The essential fact regarding West, the key to understanding his works, is to recognize that empathy was central to his ethos and that it radiated through all of his writing. That is not to say that he was himself a man of compassion, it is to state that the worldview communicated through his novels is one of compassion, defined by Webster as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." West's particular challenge as a writer was that this feeling was coupled with a liberal ironist's view of the world as one of no fixed standards or definitions. The Westian implied author was deeply concerned by the problem of suffering in the world, but it did not accept pat answers on how to solve them, whether they came from established religion, political parties, or some other source.

The anguished human search for some kind of meaning in life drove all of his novels, especially *Miss Lonelyhearts*. As discussed in Chapter Two, many critics, in particular James Light, have examined the novel as either an apologetic for, or an excoriation of Christianity. As argued, by no stretch of the imagination can West's novel be deemed a "Christian" one, in the conventional sense, meaning it never suggests that a Christian understanding of life leads to redemption and/or happiness, in this world or the next (nor does the novel impugn Christianity, as others have also suggested). For once it is enough to simply take the author's words at their face-value in the text. For example, while musing on his correspondence and the question of whether or not he should call on Mrs. Doyle, *Miss Lonelyhearts* thinks: "If he could only believe

in Christ, then adultery would be a sin, then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer” (West [1933] 2009: 26). There are many other similar examples of such thinking in the novel. West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* desperately desires a moral compass with which to navigate the world, but, a true modern, he has bitten the fatal apple of knowledge, and can never go back to having a childlike certainty in some set of expounded eternal verities.

As a result, as many critics—most recently and insightfully, Jonathan Greenberg (2006)—have noticed, West’s works exhibit a constant tug of war between idealism and cynicism, between sympathy and mockery. The aim of this project has been, in my own way, to elevate the former qualities over the latter, as the dominant strain in West’s fiction, and to explore the author’s unique method of framing the moral questions that his works pose. In *A Cool Million*, he communicates a strong moral stance through satire; in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, through irony; and in *The Day of the Locust*, through the aesthetics of apocalypse. The extremes to which he is willing to go in pushing these techniques, sometimes causes scholars (particularly in recent years), to overlook the fact that West’s fiction is actually dominated by his ethical concerns. He is a moralizer in the best of ways. The following excerpts, though admittedly taken out of context, are still illustrative of the prevailing ethos of compassion in all of West’s works:

The clown is dead; the curtain is down. And when I say clown, I mean you. After all, aren’t we all...aren’t we all clowns? Of course, I know it’s old stuff; but what difference does it make? Life *is* a stage, and *we* are clowns. What is more tragic than the role of clown? What more filled with all the essentials of great art?—pity and irony. (West [1931] 2006: 50-51)

A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke...He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. The examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (West [1933] 2009: 32)

The turn lasted about fifteen minutes and during this time Riley and Robbins told some twenty jokes, beating Lem ruthlessly at the end of each one. For a final curtain, they brought out an enormous wooden mallet labeled "The Works" and with it completely demolished our hero...At sight of the wooden leg, the presence of which they had not even suspected, the spectators were convulsed with joy. They laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards. (West [1934] 2006: 174)

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. (West [1939] 2009: 61)

Of course, those who come down on the other side of West, emphasizing only his cynicism, his endless capacity for harsh criticism of the modern world, have a strong case as well, although I argue, ultimately, that they have missed the point, mistaking West's methods for his ends. Such critics might just as easily cherry-pick four passages in his four novels that



illustrate the implied author's seeming disgust for his subjects (although I would challenge them to find anything indicative of the opposite of compassion, indifference). Regarding *Miss Lonelyhearts* especially, many have stated something to the effect that, "there is no blaming the critic who sees West writing from a position of cynicism or nihilism" (Meindl 1996: 182). Jonathan Raban, one of the best examples of a scholar not enamoured of West, writing in the 1970s, dismisses him as over-rated, a writer discussed because of his many attributes convenient for the anthologizing Americanist: a Jewish writer who renounced his religion, an expatriate (very briefly) in the roaring '20s, a Hollywood writer, and more ([1971] 1987: 376). "If Nathanael West did not exist," goes the first line of his much-cited essay, "then Leslie Fiedler would probably have had to invent him" (375). He criticizes West as a writer whose insecurities constantly spill out onto the page, "pre-eminently, the novelist as victim" (386), a sort of shrieking modernist who can only hysterically rant about the media-saturated, fragmented world in which he lives.

If Raban's is the classic critique of West, that is, that he is only a "shrieker," or to be more dignified in our criticism, only a Jeremiah, the classic rebuttal is older still, and we turn again to it, William Carlos Williams' 1930s essay defending *Miss Lonelyhearts* from charges of being sordid. Williams compares the author's function in the novel to Virgil's in Dante's *Inferno*: "It is poetry (that is, good writing) which permits a man, but no ordinary man, to descend to those regions for a purpose. It is the art of writing, in other words, which permits the downward motion since when writing is well made it enlivens and elevates the whole reader—without sweetening or benumbing the sense—while he plunges toward catastrophe" (1994: 61). The key words here are "for a purpose." West does not descend for no reason. Raban is put off, in the end, by West's obsession with commodities (in fact, as Jonathan Veitch points out, West's

*The Day of the Locust* is not an example of commodity fetishism, it is a criticism of it [1997: 144]), and his frequently crude, hysterical and surrealistic style of expression. He mistakes surface for substance. He compares West unfavourably to Fitzgerald as inelegant, inhumane, and focused only on consumerism's obvious negative social impact, rather than its simultaneous symbolic value in signalling the promise and romance of American prosperity (Raban [1971] 1987: 387-388). I would argue, instead, that much of Fitzgerald and West's work is directly comparable, especially *The Great Gatsby* and *The Day of the Locust*, highlighting an identical theme—the human cost of the dissolution of the American Dream. The major difference is temperamental and stylistic: Fitzgerald is refined, romantic, and realistic, and West is sordid, shrieking and surrealistic. Still, they are more alike than they are different, and Raban's reading of West is superficial in that he does not seem to penetrate further than West's prose style to truly grasp his content.

The question of whether or not West's next work would or could have been a new *Grapes of Wrath* is moot. His existing oeuvre tells us, the readers, all that we need to know about his governing vision. West's old works are already, in their own way, compassionate depictions of human suffering. The only difference between what he proposed to write in the future, and his previous works, was that in the future he would make his consistent ethos of compassion more evident to the casual reader, mainly through technical, stylistic changes. The themes would still be all of a piece.

West's works are notable for their purposeful lack of character development—an artistic choice that no doubt had an unfortunate impact on how his works were perceived. The portrayal of strong, recognizable and relatable characters is often what draws the lay-reader to a particular novel. West's characters, as noted, especially his protagonists, are usually ciphers, archetypes in

his carefully-staged morality plays. (In fact, as indicated periodically throughout this dissertation, West's works can be characterized by their frequent use of allegorical elements, including archetypal characters.) A case in point would be Tod Hackett in *The Day of the Locust*. Tod is curiously featureless for a main character. He delivers his lines, interacts with other characters, and makes his way through all of West's plot set-pieces, all the while with the author providing very little insight into his thought process and motivations. Miss Lonelyhearts' characterization is more detailed—although tellingly, he is never given a name—but even he is a nonentity even though he is the main character. The readers are constantly told that Miss Lonelyhearts feels a Christ-like compassion for his correspondents, but his cruel actions (tweaking his girlfriend's nipples, harassing an old homosexual man in a bathroom stall, etc.) are never adequately explained. Miss Lonelyhearts' personal acts of arbitrary violence are perhaps meant, in theory, to be consistent with the novel's central message that random cruelty abounds in the world; however, in practice they only seem out of character for the protagonist, who is supposed to be a compassionate, if naive and over-sensitive man. Miss Lonelyhearts' behaviour is allowed to be contradictory, but when this contradiction is given absolutely no explanation, his believability as a character is jeopardized. Shrike, the sadistic editor, with no back-story whatsoever, is given a more believable, vivid and consistent characterization, and is arguably the dominant personality in the novel. Ultimately, the work as a whole manages to rise above the inconsistency of Miss Lonelyhearts' characterization, but had West lived long enough to write other novels, it is fascinating to think how a different approach to character development might have changed his writing, and his public image as an author.

Another way West might have avoided being misinterpreted in future novels would be to abandon the "comic strip" approach to writing that he claimed to use to some extent in *Miss*

*Lonelyhearts* (West [1933] 1997c: 401). West described this technique as “Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald” (401). It is debatable whether or not West achieved his goal of depicting individual characters’ actions in this synchronous way. By contrast, this is what Virginia Woolf achieved in many of her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example. West’s work still seems linear and chronological, and it is still centered on the person and sometimes consciousness of the protagonist—although the reader is given very little insight into the character. Where it does resemble a comic strip is in its lack of psychological motivation behind the characters’ actions, which, granted, was intentional. In the same notes in which West describes *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a comic strip-inspired novel, he also makes the claim characteristic of his late-modernist peers, that “Psychology has nothing to do with reality nor should it be used as a motivation. The novelist is no longer a psychologist” (401).

Scrupulously cutting out all psychology in his characterization, we are left with novels so slim that they barely qualify as novellas. They could almost be classified as short stories, or even outlines of larger novels. Boris Ingster may have been justified in claiming that *Miss Lonelyhearts* might have been another *Idiot* (quoted in Martin 1970: 393) if only West had not been so determined to avoid verbosity and sentimentality in his writing. In fact, as discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, fear of the sentimental, a trait he shared with many of his other modernist peers, is probably the real motivating factor behind the culling of all “psychology” from his novels. As it is, one of the chief reasons why West’s most characteristic trait as a writer, his humanity, is under-emphasized—notwithstanding the argument that his characters are

allegorical figures—is because they are so woefully underdeveloped as recognizable human beings.

## **I. New Directions for Research**

The number of West studies has grown over the past fifty years, to the point where he can no longer be classified as an obscure American modernist. He is no Hemingway, but increasingly, he is receiving more attention from American specialists and lay readers alike. This is no doubt in large part because of West's now-trendy fixation on the culture industry and mass media in America (which is precisely why he is so popular today with Frankfurt School-inspired critics). Jonathan Veitch attributes his continuing popularity today to the fact that "he is one of the most insightful critics of the culture of capitalism and its most recent forms—consumerism, postmodernity, etc.—available in American literature," noting that his works predate the Frankfurt School's account of the culture industry, Debord's "society of the spectacle" and Baudrillard's simulacrum (1997: 133). One might also add to this list Ellul's technological society, some latent understanding of which is also reflected in West's works. Today such interests are the norm, but among American fiction writers of the 1930s, at least, not the cultural theorists of the day, sustained analysis of the impact of the mass media on the masses was rarely attempted. From a contemporary perspective, there are moments in his novels when West even seems prescient in his understanding of the impact of the mass media (particularly the film and newspaper industries) on popular culture. His major contribution to our understanding of mass culture is the observation, in all of his novels, that the media makes genuine human emotion seem banal, or as he puts it explicitly, movies, radio and newspapers are to blame for making human dreams "puerile" (West [1933] 2009: 39). In an age of reality television and

Twitter, this rings more true than it might have in the 1930s, when West was frequently accused of being unduly negative.

West's relevance to the study of mass culture is a subject that has been deservedly mined over the past few decades.<sup>ii</sup> This study focuses on the ethical content of his deeply humanistic novels, serving in some ways as an update on the earliest serious West scholarly work in the 1960s and 1970s. Another new direction for future research, now that West is more or less established as a major American modernist, is the author's American literary genealogy. West is frequently compared to Dostoevsky and the French surrealists, but seldom to his own countrymen and women. To the best of my knowledge, a scholarly work focussing specifically on his direct *American* literary influences has not yet been attempted. Such a work would be useful because it would help West make the full transition from major minor American writer, to canonical American writer, a position he well deserves, given the quality of his writing and his devotion to sharply analysing the American cultural scene. If West continues to be classified as something of an anomaly in the American literary world of the '30s—an idiosyncratic and French-influenced late-modernist in a sea of proletarian writers—this transition may never take place.

West's subject matter, the marginalized men and women of 1930s America, is the same as that of the proletarian writers, but his sensibility, style and politics are so different that comparisons to them seem pointless. The American proletarian writers of the 1930s, including Mike Gold, Robert Cantwell, Edward Dahlberg, and Josephine Herbst, all viewed their works, to some extent, as vehicles for their Leftist progressive social message. West, as described in previous chapters, was sympathetic to their views—counting many of these writers, in particular, Herbst, among his group of friends—however, he was lukewarm in his politics. In Hollywood,

he was an early member of the Anti-Nazi League, but grew disenchanted with it after the Hitler-Stalin Pact, when many of the League's Communist members rationalized remaining neutral in the face of Nazi aggression. West wrote to his brother-in-law that the question "as to why against Fascism and why not against Communism often disturbs my sleep" (quoted in Martin 1970: 352). He also complained that "although I consider myself on their side," the radical press thoroughly disliked his work (quoted in West 1997). In comparison to, for example, Gold's heart-wrenching semi-autobiographical, social realist work, *Jews without Money*, West's works are surrealist and sometimes even whimsical (especially *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*.) Nowhere do they suggest that a dysfunctional political system is primarily to blame for his characters' woes, nor do they suggest a proper revolutionary solution. In fact, the triumphant mob that elevates Lemuel Pitkin to martyr status at the end of *A Cool Million* could just as easily be Communist as Fascist. If anything, West's works appear to communicate a strong fear of all popular political movements.

Another convenient category for West might be "Jewish American writer," but this one is too broad; furthermore, West made no attempt to describe the Jewish American experience in his novels. Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs, and Michael Gold, for example, Jewish American New Yorkers of West's approximate age, all wrote about ghetto life on the Lower East Side, and despite their major dissimilarities as writers, can therefore still be reasonably compared. West's writing, on the other hand, makes no references to the world of working class, immigrant Jews. West's comparatively affluent, secularized, and educated family background had little in common with these other New York Jews, and it showed in their writing.<sup>iii</sup> As Werner Sollors notes in *Beyond Ethnicity*, American authors of "national fame or striking formal accomplishments" tend to be classified simply as American, not "ethnic" (1986: 241-242).

Among such writers, Sollors mentions Eugene O'Neill, Carl Sandburg, Vladimir Nabokov, and also—Nathanael West (242). “Ethnic” can also be shorthand for parochial, foreign, and old-fashioned. In West’s milieu, mainly New York of the ‘20s and ‘30s, it carried associations of the Old World, peasantry, goulash, farm animals. West’s full embrace of the modern style, perhaps, along with his focus on the wholly American, spared him from being pigeonholed as an ethnic writer.

When West is compared to his fellow American writers, most critics find it easier to point out his descendants, not his progenitors. Jonathan Lethem echoes others when he states that West’s style of surrealist aesthetics applied to American popular culture is the precursor to the works of Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, and Joseph Heller, among others (2009: xi). It is certainly just as easy to make the case that West was an early postmodernist, as some have done in recent decades, as it is to claim him as a modernist. But what only a few have noted in passing, and only one scholar has ever discussed in detail, is West’s tremendous debt to his most immediate American literary forefather, Sherwood Anderson. Only Randall Reid, nearly half a century ago now, devotes about ten pages in his West study to this connection, pointing out that “echoes of Anderson are everywhere in West’s two best novels [*Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*]” (1967: 140). Although Reid is very effective in isolating one of the central similarities between the two—that both authors explore the “psychology of baffled expression” (142)—he does not place this theme within an American literary (or historical) context. A longer scholarly work or essay isolating the West-Anderson sensibility in American literature has never yet been attempted.

The fact that the West-Anderson connection has been so rarely discussed may be due in part to the fact that the settings in which their works take place are so radically different.



Anderson's dramas play out in dusty, one-horse towns in the Midwest, while the settings of West's best-known novels represent two different, yet definitively American urban models: New York and Los Angeles. The Midwestern writer, a generation older, has never quite received his due as a major figure in American literature, despite the fact that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner have credited him as a major influence on their work. Jay Martin also makes the West-Anderson connection in passing several times in his still definitive West biography, writing that "His [West's] true peers were writers like Sherwood Anderson, Fitzgerald, Eliot, Faulkner, and Williams" (1970: 187).

West resembles Anderson in a number of ways. Their settings and methods are different, but fundamentally, both are moral allegorists, Anderson perhaps more ham-handedly. The two men also share an existential sadness, a compassionate pessimism. Anderson's young hero George Willard imagines "the countless figures of men who before his time have come out of nothingness into the world, lived their lives and again disappeared into nothingness" ([1919] 1997: 193). West's protagonists are portrayed as wanderers and pawns, helpless observers of the world around them. The universe they inhabit is chaotic, violent, and purposeless. Tod Hackett, the set designer and artist manqué, working on his tableau, "The Burning of Los Angeles," is typical. Hackett's uncompleted painting depicts an apocalyptic final scene that he imagines but is powerless to stop, the fiery end of Hollywood, with his friends and acquaintances all in full flight from the inferno.

As others have noted, for example, Dieter Meindl (1996) in his book on the development of the American grotesque, West and Anderson are both exemplars of the American grotesque mode. Meindl places Anderson on a list of Southerners including William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Truman Capote as "modernist grotesque[s]," while West is grouped with Joseph

Heller, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon as representative of the “postmodern grotesque” (12). (Again, it is not unusual that West, whose major works were written a good thirty years before Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, is categorized as a postmodern along with these younger writers.) The best scholarship, perhaps, linking West’s works with the grotesque comes from Ralph Ciancio, who writes:

The structural principles of West’s art take hold in the nature of human existence itself, in the fact that death and the negation of all desire are built into human finitude, wherein Being and non-Being intersect. This radical self-contradiction locks West’s grotesques into the absurd at the outset whether they are conscious of it or not. Their plaintive rebellion and gestures toward transcendence cannot hope to succeed, and where rebellion is doomed to fail from the start, the effort is inherently ludicrous, as potentially comic as tragic. (1995: 2)

For both West and Anderson, comedy and tragedy flow from the same source: the disjuncture between magnificent dreams and pitiful human reality. The grotesque is born of this radical incongruity.

The grotesque figure *par excellence*, who is clearly influenced by an earlier Anderson character, is West’s Homer Simpson, the archetypal Midwesterner who has “come to California to die” (West [1939] 2009: 60). Homer is shambling and childlike, an idiot savant who is besotted with the ruthless young actress, Faye Greener. His restless hands are described as “...a pair of strange aquatic animals. When they were thoroughly chilled and began to crawl about, he lifted them out and hid them in a towel” (82). As Randall Reid and Jay Martin have noticed, Homer’s strangely independent hands are reminiscent of Anderson’s character, Wing Biddlebaum’s hands, in “Hands;” the description of both suggests that there is a repressed aspect

of their characters' personalities (Reid 1967: 140; Martin 1970: 312). It is not known whether West consciously intended his character to resemble Biddlebaum, but the similarities between the two are too obvious to be wholly coincidental<sup>iv</sup>. A study exploring these links, and the no doubt many others between Anderson and West, is long overdue.

Another new direction for West scholarship, and more importantly, this study's other major topic, ethical criticism in general, is the ambitious, long-overdue project of successfully adapting Levinasian philosophy to literary theory. As Lawrence Buell states in his essay, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics," Levinas, who he notes has not yet been assimilated into literary theory, could potentially turn out to be "the perfect abettor of the ethical turn away from both poststructuralism and Marxism: trumping Derrida with the claim of ethics' priority to epistemology, and pre-empting political criticism by identifying ethicicity with acknowledgment of the other" (1999: 7). That being stated, Buell also recognizes the many unavoidable difficulties in using Levinas for literary criticism, most obviously, his suspicion of art and literature as unworthy substitutes (mere images) for real, face-to-face social relationships with the other (7). Ten years after this essay was written, Levinas' philosophy has still not been successfully incorporated into literary theory.

One early major sustained attempt to do so,<sup>v</sup> or at least explore the possibility of doing so, is Robert Eaglestone's work, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (1997), published several years before the Buell essay, but only referenced by Buell briefly in an endnote, perhaps because of the unsatisfactory conclusions Eaglestone reaches. Eaglestone uses Denis Donoghue's convenient schematic of criticism, dividing critics into "epi-readers," those who look beyond the text to the ethical world it represents, and "graphi-readers," those who focus on language and limit their studies to understanding the text linguistically (3-4). He includes De Man and J. Hillis

Miller among the graphi-readers, and Martha Nussbaum and the whole band of “modernist critics” and “modernist humanists” like Eliot and F.R. Leavis, as epi-readers. He is critical of both groups’ approaches, but saves his harshest criticisms for the second, grossly simplifying their views thusly: “For Nussbaum and epi-readers, language or text simply does not exist: ethical positions shine through like light through a perfect window” (94).

Eagleton repeatedly states that Levinas alone can potentially bridge this impasse (1997: 7), but runs into difficulties when forced to actually explain how. Although Eagleton is useful in explaining some of the nuances of Levinas’ philosophy—particularly the progression of his thought on the nature of language and representation from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*—he concludes by admitting, “There cannot be a Levinasian ethical criticism *per se*, because as soon as a way of reading becomes a methodology, an orthodoxy or a totalising system, it loses its ability to interrupt, to fracture the said” (165). He only goes so far as to say that *Otherwise than Being* might potentially provide a foundation for some sort of ethical criticism (130). He explains Levinas’ “saying” as a much-needed interruption of the said, an interruption which, according to the great thinker, is the task of philosophy (156), or ethical criticism. Eagleton argues that Levinas’ thought: “...underlies method: it is the reason for a critical reading and is presupposed by any criticism with a concern for ethics. The reduction in relation to literature is the constant interruption enacted in *certain forms of interpretation*. There can be no last word, no final interpretation beyond interruption” (167-168; italics added). These “certain forms of interpretation,” Eagleton makes clear, are what are generally referred to as “theory.” He claims that theorists ask challenging new questions, interrupting the status quo, and that “their disruptive power is ethical” (177).

I strongly question Eaglestone's assumption that only "graphi-readers" and theorists (one and the same group?) question accepted readings of texts, and that "epi-readers" (the designation alone is misleading—as if humanist critics were dreamers, floating sublimely above the actual text) stick to the same old, tired interpretations. To stick to the topic at hand, however, the possibility of converting Levinas' philosophy into literary theory, Eaglestone's arguments are contradictory, to say the least. If Levinas' "saying" versus the "said" ideas can be boiled down, essentially, to the constant interruption of the orthodoxy, the said, by the ethical saying, then this simply means a persistent, radical questioning of established "truths." Poststructuralist theory does not hold a monopoly on this tendency. In fact, when any theoretical stance hardens into something worthy of the title "theory," it has arguably become a "said." It is unclear how Levinas' thought, as interpreted by Eaglestone, can stay in its pristine, ethereal form, inspiring theory without becoming it.

If this all sounds obtuse, that is because it is. The most useful thing that can be learned from Eaglestone's long, interesting experiment is that those interested in applying Levinasian philosophy to literary study must proceed with extreme caution. Rather than attempting to create a Levinasian critical methodology of sorts, an overwhelming and even paradoxical project, given his life-long concern with philosophy's fixation on the synthesis of knowledge at the cost of overlooking the actual basis for ethics, human relationships<sup>vi</sup>, it makes sense, instead, to more modestly use certain individual Levinasian ideas to elucidate the ethical content of West. An obvious area to begin is *Otherwise than Being* ([1974] 1981), in which Levinas argues that responsibility for the other is the primary responsibility, before the prerogative to discover the true and the good, and before human freedom. We are born responsible, in a sense, hostages to the other by virtue of proximity. Levinas writes: "Proximity, difference which is non-

indifference, is responsibility. It is a response without a question, the immediacy of peace that is incumbent on me. It is the signification of signs. It is the humanity of man not understood on the basis of transcendental subjectivity” (139). It seems that there must be a way to link this theory to West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, whose protagonist lives out these ideas in his daily life. Miss Lonelyhearts accepts his responsibility for the other, but what drives him mad is his questioning why the other must suffer at all. Those who are well-versed in Levinasian theory may be able to articulate this conflict with more finesse. Is Miss Lonelyhearts an example of the morbid over-development of the responsibility of the other? Is Levinas’ theory practically applicable in real life, or is it meant as an ideal only? These are the sorts of questions that might be posed and answered by future scholarly works.

The present study is subtitled “An Ethical Criticism of Nathanael West” for the following reasons: because his moralizing tales are particularly well-suited for ethical contemplation; because this study uses a variety of philosophical and ethical theories to better understand them; and most fundamentally, because it aims to illuminate each novel’s distinctive moral philosophy. In so doing, I have attempted to answer the question first broached in the introduction, why reading the seemingly misanthropic West can frequently be a morally elevating experience. The answer seems to lie in the author’s portrayal of human suffering. While many critics have focussed on the sickening violence of West’s literary world (and, as previously noted, West himself believed that “In America violence is idiomatic” [(1932) 1997: 399]), the ultimate result of portraying this brutality is often overlooked. An irony is at work here: that violence and cruelty can also elicit the most tender emotions, the emotions most befitting of a righteous man or woman, in the Biblical sense of the word. Human beings may be at their best when they suffer vicariously through others, and are then motivated to act to

alleviate that suffering. Sympathy, a term associated with “sentimental” novels and scorned by many modernists,<sup>vii</sup> is nonetheless precisely what the reader of West is made to feel. Amazingly, we feel it even after West has presented his suffering characters as vapid, coarse, unlettered, ridiculous, embittered—and many other undesirable traits besides.

Having stated that further study of the American literary heritage influencing West leads immediately to Sherwood Anderson, it is appropriate to conclude with an Anderson quote that evokes West’s overarching ethic. Miss Lonelyhearts, who dies ambiguously in the novel, as either a holy saint, or a deluded fool, is referred to as a “leper lick” (West [1933] 2009: 14), a man with a “Christ complex” (13). Similarly, in the chapter, “The Philosopher,” in Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, the queer, enigmatic Doctor Parcival expounds his philosophy to the young George Willard, saying: “The idea is very simple, so simple that if you are not careful you will forget it. It is this—that everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified” ([1919] 1997: 37). This is West’s message as well: not primarily that humanity is corrupted, but that all human beings suffer, and tacitly, that recognition of that shared suffering (as Rorty, among other moral philosophers, has pointed out) is one of the few meaningful responses we have to offer one another. Pain and degradation are the human lot, but by communicating these things with compassion as well as literary skill, he goes beyond them. This is in part, as most ethical critics would argue, due to the unique power of well-crafted stories like *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* to dramatize and make personally meaningful abstract philosophical questions. West’s work is ethically compelling because it demands recognition from the reader of the dignity of suffering, despite it all.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>For a pointed discussion of West's publishing misadventures, and their huge impact on his literary career, see Gerald Howard's *New York Times* article, "Let This Be a Lesson to You: The Snakebit Life of Nathanael West" (1990).

<sup>ii</sup>See, especially, Rita Barnard's *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (1995) and Jonathan Veitch's *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (1997).

<sup>iii</sup>Despite their different backgrounds, West and Mike Gold travelled in similar literary circles in New York, and were friendly. In 1932, West co-purchased a farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that Gold had purchased only a couple years previously with profits from his work, *Jews without Money* (Martin 1970: 200). Despite these connections, the chasm between Gold, ardent Communist, champion and member of the working class, and West, the classic middle-class liberal intellectual who viewed political struggles from a polite distance, is revealed in a *New Republic* review West wrote. In it he suggests that blame for asinine films, "Soft Soap for the Barber" (West [1934] 1997), be shifted from the movie-makers to the movie-consumers, the general public. He concludes by airily commenting: "Of course, many things can be said in defense of 'the barber.' Gene Fowler wisely leaves that to Gilbert Seldes; we prefer to leave it to Mike Gold, and no offense meant" (408).

<sup>iv</sup>Besides Reid and Martin, Ezra Greenspan (1983: 93) has also made this connection.

<sup>v</sup>Another work with a somewhat similar mandate, this one published after the Buell essay, is Michael Eskin's *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (2000). This study is emblematic of the difficulties of incorporating Levinas into mainstream literary criticism; in order to understand Eskin's arguments, the reader must have some working knowledge of a.) Levinasian theory; b.) Bakhtinian metalinguistics; and c.) the Mandel'shtam-Celan dialogue. Its very sophistication, unfortunately, ensures a small readership of scholars.

<sup>vi</sup>This is the main argument of *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas [1961] 1969). In his later series of interviews with Philippe Nemo, published as *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas explains these ideas, fundamental to his philosophy, very clearly:

The irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in fact to be elsewhere: not in synthesis, but in the face to face of humans, in sociality, in its moral signification. But it must be understood that morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is an ethics. (1985: 77).



<sup>vii</sup>For more on this topic, see Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* (1991), which indicts "high modernism" for many alleged crimes, especially the undermining and marginalization of popular fiction by female writers. Clark's work is informed by Jane Tompkins' highly influential rereading of American literary history, *Sensational Designs* (1985), which essentially argues that texts become "classics" because of historical contingency, not inherent merit. Tompkins also claims that female writers have been unfairly excluded from the canon, oftentimes as the result of their very popularity with the masses, and overt focus on social issues, causing their works to be labeled as sensational, rather than "serious" literature.

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